

= What Is Life =

" What Is Life " is a song by English musician George Harrison , released on his 1970 triple album All Things Must Pass . In many countries , it was issued as the second single from the album , in February 1971 , becoming a top @-@ ten hit in the United States , Canada and elsewhere , and topping singles charts in Australia and Switzerland . In the United Kingdom , " What Is Life " appeared as the B @-@ side to " My Sweet Lord " , which was the best @-@ selling single there of 1971 . Harrison 's backing musicians on the song include Eric Clapton and the entire Delaney & Bonnie Friends band , with whom he had toured during the final months of the Beatles . Harrison co @-@ produced the recording with Phil Spector , whose Wall of Sound production also employed a prominent string arrangement by John Barham and multiple acoustic rhythm guitars , played by Harrison 's fellow Apple Records signings Badfinger .

An uptempo composition in the soul genre , " What Is Life " is one of several Harrison love songs that appear to be directed at both a woman and a deity . Harrison wrote the song in 1969 and originally intended it as a track for his friend and Apple protégé Billy Preston to record . Built around a descending guitar riff , it is one of Harrison 's most popular compositions and was a regular inclusion in his live performances . Rolling Stone magazine has variously described it as a " classic " and an " exultant song of surrender " .

" What Is Life " has appeared in the soundtrack for feature films such as Goodfellas ( 1990 ) , Patch Adams ( 1998 ) , Big Daddy ( 1999 ) and This Is 40 ( 2012 ) . Harrison 's original recording was included on the compilations The Best of George Harrison and Let It Roll , and live versions appear on his album Live in Japan ( 1992 ) and in Martin Scorsese 's 2011 documentary George Harrison : Living in the Material World . In 1972 , Olivia Newton @-@ John had a UK hit with her version of the song . Ronnie Aldrich , the Ventures , the Four Freshmen and Shawn Mullins are among the other artists who have covered the track .

= = Background and composition = =

Even before his temporary departure from the Beatles in January 1969 ( documented in the song " Wah @-@ Wah " ) , their Apple Records label was an " emancipating force " for Harrison from the creative restrictions imposed on him within the band , according to his musical biographer , Simon Leng . In his " definitive " article on All Things Must Pass for Mojo magazine , John Harris has written of Harrison 's " journey " as a solo artist beginning in November 1968 ? when he spent time in Woodstock with Bob Dylan and the Band ? and incorporating a series of other collaborations through the following eighteen months , including various Apple projects and a support role on Delaney & Bonnie and Friends ' brief European tour . One of these projects , carried out intermittently from April to July 1969 , was his production of That 's the Way God Planned It , an album by Billy Preston , whom Harrison had met during the Beatles ' Hamburg years and had recently recruited to guest on the band 's troubled Get Back sessions . It was while driving up to a Preston session in London from his home in Esher , Surrey , that Harrison came up with the song " What Is Life " .

In his autobiography , I , Me , Mine , Harrison describes it as having been written " very quickly " and recalls that he thought it would be a perfect , " catchy pop song " for Preston to record . His lyrics , while simple , were similarly uplifting and universal :

What I feel , I can 't say  
But my love is there for you any time of day  
But if it 's not love that you need  
Then I 'll try my best to make everything succeed .  
Tell me , what is my life without your love ?  
And tell me , who am I without you , by my side ?

These lyrics have caused some debate among biographers and music critics , as to whether " What Is Life " should be viewed as a straightforward love song ? perhaps a " lovingly crafted paen " to Harrison 's wife Pattie , as Alan Clayson puts it ? or a devotional song like many of Harrison 's

compositions . Ian Inglis writes that the song title suggests a " philosophical debate about the meaning of life " , yet its rendering as " what is my life " in the choruses " reshapes [ the meaning ] completely " . Theologian Dale Allison finds no religious content in " What Is Life " but notes the " failure of words to express feelings " implied in the opening line ( " What I feel , I can 't say " ) , a recurring theme of Harrison 's spiritual songs such as " That Is All " , " Mystical One " and " Pisces Fish " . Joshua Greene , another religious academic , identifies the song as part of its parent album 's " intimately detailed account of a spiritual journey " : where " Awaiting on You All " shows Harrison " convinced of his union with God " , " What Is Life " reveals him to be " uncertain that he deserved such divine favor " .

The song 's second verse repeats what Inglis refers to as the " somewhat confusing promise " from Harrison ( in lines 3 and 4 ) should his love be " rejected " :

What I know , I can 't do

If I give my love out to everyone like you

But if it 's not love that you need

Then I 'll try my best to make everything succeed .

Musically , Simon Leng describes " What Is Life " as " Motown @-@ spiced " and a comparatively rare example of its composer 's willingness to embrace the role of " entertainer " in his songwriting .

In I Me Mine , Harrison recalls that he changed his mind about offering " What Is Life " to Preston once he 'd arrived at Olympic Studios and found the singer busy working on more typical material ? or " playing his funky stuff " as Harrison puts it . Rather than attempt it with the Beatles during the band 's concurrent Abbey Road sessions , he stockpiled the track with his many other unused songs from the period ? " All Things Must Pass " , " Let It Down " , " I 'd Have You Anytime " and " Run of the Mill " among them ? and revisited it a year later , after completing work on Preston 's second Apple album , Encouraging Words .

= = Recording = =

By May 1970 , having recently collaborated with " genuine R & B heavy @-@ weights " such as Doris Troy and Preston , as well as participating in the " blue @-@ eyed soul " Delaney & Bonnie European tour , along with Eric Clapton , the previous December , Harrison was well placed to record " What Is Life " , Leng observes . With Phil Spector as co @-@ producer and all the Friends team on hand , the song was among the first tracks taped for Harrison 's debut post @-@ Beatles solo album ; recording took place at Abbey Road Studios in London , during late May or early June . The same core of musicians ? Bobby Whitlock , Carl Radle , Jim Gordon , Bobby Keys and Jim Price ? would similarly elevate other All Things Must Pass tracks such as " Awaiting on You All " , " Art of Dying " and " Hear Me Lord " .

The recording is defined by Harrison 's descending , fuzztone guitar riff , which also serves as the motif for the chorus . The track opens with this riff , which is then joined by Radle 's bass and " churning " rhythm guitar from Clapton , before Gordon 's drums bring the full band in . During the verses , Gordon moves to a square , Motown @-@ style beat ? or " rock @-@ steady Northern soul backbeat " in Leng 's words ? before returning to the " galloping rhythm " of the more open , " knockout " choruses , and the song is driven equally by Badfinger drummer Mike Gibbins ' powerful tambourine work .

On " What Is Life " , Spector provided what music critic David Fricke terms " echo @-@ drenched theater " , in the form of reverb @-@ heavy brass , soaring strings ( arranged by John Barham ) and " a choir of multitracked Harrisons " . The vocals and Barham 's contribution , along with a brief slide @-@ guitar commentary from Harrison over the final verse , were overdubbed at Trident Studios , most likely during late August through September . Dated 19 August , Spector 's written comments on Harrison 's early mix of the song had suggested a " proper background voice " was still needed ; like sound engineer Ken Scott , Spector would be impressed with the result , saying , " He was a great harmoniser ... he could do all the [ vocal ] parts himself " and rating Harrison " one of the most commercial musicians and songwriters and quintessential players I 've ever known in my entire career " .

= = Release = =

" What Is Life " was released in late November 1970 as the first track on side two of All Things Must Pass , in its original , triple LP format . Along with " My Sweet Lord " and " Isn 't It a Pity " , the song had already been identified as a potential hit single by Allan Steckler , manager of Apple 's US operation . Backed by another album track , " Apple Scruffs " , " What Is Life " was issued as a single in America on 15 February 1971 ( as Apple 1828 ) , just as the " My Sweet Lord " / " Isn 't It a Pity " double A @-@ side was finally slipping out of the top ten .

The front of the single 's US picture sleeve consisted of a photo of Harrison playing guitar inside the central tower of his recently purchased home , Friar Park , in Henley @-@ on @-@ Thames . The tower 's sole , octagonal @-@ shaped room was an area that Harrison had adopted as his personal temple and meditation space . This picture was taken by photographer Barry Feinstein , whose Camouflage Productions partner , Tom Wilkes , originally used it as part of an elaborate poster intended as an insert in the album package . The poster featured a painting of the Hindu deity Krishna watching a group of naked maidens beside a bathing pond . Harrison apparently felt uncomfortable with the symbolism in Wilkes 's design ? the Friar Park tower image filled the top half of the poster , floating among clouds above the Krishna scene ? so Wilkes abandoned the concept and instead used a darkened photo of Harrison inside the house as the album poster . The more common picture sleeve internationally was a close @-@ up of Feinstein 's All Things Must Pass front @-@ cover image , taken on the main lawn of Friar Park . In Denmark , the sleeve featured four shots of Harrison , again with guitar , taken on stage during the Delaney & Bonnie tour .

At the end of March , " What Is Life " peaked at number 10 on the Billboard Hot 100 and number 7 on Cash Box 's Top 100 chart , making Harrison the first ex @-@ Beatle to have two top @-@ ten hits in the United States . The single was a success internationally , climbing to number 1 in Switzerland and on Australia 's Go @-@ Set National Top 60 , and reaching the top three elsewhere in Europe and in Canada . In Britain , where Harrison had resisted issuing a single from All Things Must Pass until midway through January , " What Is Life " appeared on the B @-@ side to " My Sweet Lord " ? a combination that became the top @-@ selling single of 1971 in that country .

= = Reception = =

" What Is Life " is one of Harrison 's most commercial and popular songs ? a " spiritual guitar quest " that " became [ a ] classic " , according to Rolling Stone magazine . On release , Billboard magazine 's reviewer wrote of " What Is Life " and " Apple Scruffs " as " intriguing rhythm follows @-@ ups " to Harrison 's previous single , which were " sure to repeat that success " and " should prove big juke box items " . In their Solo Beatles Compendium , authors Chip Madinger and Mark Easter refer to it as an " intensely catchy track " and view its pairing with " My Sweet Lord " in the UK as perhaps the strongest of all of Harrison 's singles . Writing in 1981 , NME critic Bob Woffinden grouped " What Is Life " with " My Sweet Lord " , " Isn 't It a Pity " and " Awaiting on You All " as " all excellent songs " .

Reviewing the 2001 reissue of All Things Must Pass , for Rolling Stone , James Hunter wrote of how the album 's music " exults in breezy rhythms " , among which " the colorful revolutions of ' What Is Life ' ... [ move ] like a Ferris wheel " . The following year , in Rolling Stone Press 's Harrison tribute book , David Fricke included " What Is Life " among his selection of " essential Harrison performances " ( just three of which date from the ex @-@ Beatle 's solo years ) and described the track as an " exultant song of surrender " , abetted by Harrison 's " pumping fuzz guitar " and the song 's " singalong magnetism " . AllMusic 's Richie Unterberger similarly praises " What Is Life " for its " anthemic " qualities , " particularly snazzy horn lines " , and a guitar riff that is " one more entry in the catalog of George Harrison 's book of arresting , low , descending guitar lines " .

Writing in the book 1 @, @ 000 Recordings to Hear Before You Die , author Tom Moon refers to " the upbeat single ' What Is Life ' " as an example of how Harrison " grabs what he needs from his old band ? that insinuating hook sense ? and uses it to frame an utterly comfortable metaphysical discourse " . Alan Clayson describes " What Is Life " as a seemingly " lovey @-@ dovey pop song "

that " craftily renewed the simplistic tonic @-@ to @-@ dominant riff cliché " , while Simon Leng credits Harrison 's " innate ability to write very fine pop @-@ rock songs " and deems the result " as innovative an exercise in rock @-@ soul as The Temptations ' ' Cloud Nine ' ' . Among Harrison biographers , only Ian Inglis is less than enthusiastic , acknowledging that Barham 's orchestration and the other musicians give the track " undoubted excitement and energy " , but lamenting that the song offers " little overall coherence between words and music " .

In a 2010 poll to find the " 10 Best George Harrison Songs " , AOL Radio listeners voted " What Is Life " third behind " My Sweet Lord " and " Blow Away " . A similar list by Michael Galluci of Ultimate Classic Rock placed it second ( behind " My Sweet Lord " ) , as Galluci wrote of the track having " a giant pop hook as its guide " as well as " the catchiest chorus Harrison ever penned " . In 2009 , Matt Melis of Consequence of Sound listed it sixth among his " Top Ten Songs by Ex @-@ Beatles " , writing : " it 's arguable that Harrison 's All Things Must Pass is the best solo album put out by a Beatle . ' What is Life ' ? with its riff @-@ driven bounce , soaring harmonies on the choruses , and perfectly placed sax and trumpet , [ is ] probably Harrison 's catchiest pop song . " In the 2005 publication NME Originals : Beatles ? The Solo Years 1970 ? 1980 , Adrian Thrills rated it first among Harrison 's " ten solo gems " , adding : " One of Harrison 's greatest guitar riffs ? brilliant pop . " The song is said to be a favourite of Foo Fighters singer Dave Grohl . In a Rolling Stone readers ' poll , titled " 10 Greatest Solo Beatle Songs " , the song placed fourth , with the editor commenting : " The track is deceptively simple , and more layers become apparent the more often you play it . " " What Is Life " has featured in Bruce Pollock 's book The 7 @,@ 500 Most Important Songs of 1944 ? 2000 , Treble website 's " The Top 200 Songs of the 1970s " ( ranked at number 101 ) and Dave Thompson 's 1000 Songs That Rock Your World ( at number 247 ) .

= = Subsequent releases and appearances in films = =

" What Is Life " was included on the 1976 compilation The Best of George Harrison as well as 2009 's Let It Roll : Songs by George Harrison . The song has also been featured in a number of popular movies : Martin Scorsese 's Goodfellas ( 1990 ) , during the " May 11 , 1980 " sequence ; Tom Shadyac 's Patch Adams ( 1998 ) ; and , more recently , Sam Mendes ' Away We Go ( 2009 ) . In late 2012 , " What Is Life " was used in advance promotion for the film This Is 40 , directed by Judd Apatow , although it was omitted from the accompanying soundtrack album . According to Rolling Stone : " Today , many people know it merely as a song from all those soundtracks : it 's in This Is 40 , Patch Adams , Goodfellas and many more . It 's almost as ubiquitous as ' Let My Love Open the Door ' or ' Solsbury Hill . ' " In Scorsese 's 2011 documentary George Harrison : Living in the Material World , " What Is Life " plays over a sequence of 1969 photos of Harrison ? with , variously , Preston , Jackie Lomax , the Plastic Ono Band , Clapton and Ravi Shankar ? immediately before which , archive footage shows him discussing the restrictions he felt within the Beatles and how the band " had to implode " .

An alternative studio version of " What Is Life " ? in fact , a rough mix of the original backing track with different orchestration ( in this case , piccolo trumpet and oboe ) ? was issued as one of five bonus tracks on the 2001 remaster of All Things Must Pass . In the accompanying booklet , Harrison writes that this orchestral arrangement was discarded because he " didn 't like the feel " . Speaking to Billboard editor @-@ in @-@ chief Timothy White in December 2000 , Harrison explained the reason for the lack of a guide vocal on this version : " I 'm playing the fuzz guitar part that goes all through the song . So all I could do on the [ initial ] take was to give the band the cue line ? the first line of each verse ? and then go back to playing that riff . So that rough mix without the vocal ? I 'd forgot all about it ? " The track also appears on the 2014 Apple Years 1968 ? 75 reissue of All Things Must Pass .

= = Live performance = =

A live version of the song , recorded with Eric Clapton and his band in December 1991 , is available on Harrison 's 1992 album Live in Japan album . The performance was recorded at Tokyo Dome on

17 December , during the final show of the tour .

Part of a concert performance of " What Is Life " from Harrison 's 1974 North American tour with Shankar is included in Scorsese 's George Harrison : Living in the Material World . While challenging the commonly held view that this controversial 1974 tour was a " disaster " , Simon Leng writes of a Fort Worth performance of " What Is Life " that was " greeted with a reception that matched anything the New York audience at the Bangla Desh concerts expressed " .

= = Cover versions = =

= = = Olivia Newton @-@ John = = =

Australian pop singer Olivia Newton @-@ John recorded " What Is Life " , along with a version of Harrison 's All Things Must Pass track " Behind That Locked Door " , for her 1972 album Olivia . The song was arranged and produced by Bruce Welch of the Shadows and John Farrar , who was Newton @-@ John 's regular producer and collaborator during the 1970s .

Released as a single in some countries , this version reached the UK top 20 in March 1972 , peaking at number 16 . It has since appeared on Newton @-@ John compilation albums such as Back to Basics : The Essential Collection 1971 ? 1992 ( 1992 ) and The Definitive Collection ( 2002 ) .

= = = Other artists = = =

In 1971 , British easy listening pianist Ronnie Aldrich covered " What Is Life " ( as well as " My Sweet Lord " ) on his album Love Story . That same year , a version by the Ventures appeared on their New Testament album . Also in 1971 , a Finnish @-@ language version of the song , titled " Mikä Saa Ihmisen Elämään " , was released as a single by local singer Oliver ? better known as Veikko Laiho , of the Laiho Trio .

The Four Freshmen recorded " What Is Life " for their album Fresh ! in 1986 , six years after which Nicola Sirkis covered the song on the album Dans La Lune ... A version by Shawn Mullins was released as a single in 1999 and plays over the closing credits of the Adam Sandler movie Big Daddy ( 1999 ) .

Following Harrison 's death , Japanese band the Collectors contributed a recording of " What Is Life " to the Gentle Guitar Dreams tribute album , released in May 2002 . Classical guitarist Joseph Breznikar recorded a version of the song for his 2003 tribute album George Harrison Remembered : A Touch of Class . In November 2004 , Neal Morse released his recording of " What Is Life " on the special @-@ edition version of his album One . Les Fradkin included a cover of " What Is Life " on his 2005 tribute CD Something for George .

= = Personnel = =

The following musicians are believed to have played on " What Is Life " :

George Harrison ? vocals , lead guitar , acoustic guitar , slide guitar , backing vocals

Eric Clapton ? rhythm guitar

Bobby Whitlock ? organ

Carl Radle ? bass

Jim Gordon ? drums

Jim Price ? trumpet , horn arrangement

Bobby Keys ? saxophone

Pete Ham ? acoustic guitar

Tom Evans ? acoustic guitar

Joey Molland ? acoustic guitar

Mike Gibbins ? tambourine

John Barham ? string arrangement

= = Chart performance = =

= = = George Harrison version = = =

= = = Olivia Newton @-@ John version = = =