



# **The Words and Music of John Lennon**

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# The Words and Music of John Lennon

Ben Urish and Ken Bielen

*James E. Perone, Series Editor*

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In 1967 we were living in Springfield, Missouri, and I had just turned nine. I was riding in the car with my mother and “Strawberry Fields Forever” came on the radio. I was terrified. It didn’t sound like anything I’d ever heard before with its odd pulsing tones and droning, nearly monotonous vocals. It seemed nightmarish. To reassure me, my mother started to explain what the lyrics meant and how the sounds were supposed to approximate what was going on with the singer’s emotions and in his mind.

It was one of the pivotal moments of my life.

I dedicate my work on this book to my mother, Sue. Mom: thanks for helping to keep me from living with my eyes closed.

—Ben Urish



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# Series Foreword

Although the term *singer-songwriters* might most frequently be associated with a cadre of musicians of the early 1970s such as Paul Simon, James Taylor, Carly Simon, Joni Mitchell, Cat Stevens, and Carole King, the Praeger Singer-Songwriter Collection defines singer-songwriters more broadly, both in terms of style and in terms of time period. The series includes volumes on musicians who have been active from approximately the 1960s through the present. Musicians who write and record in folk, rock, soul, hip-hop, country, and various hybrids of these styles will be represented. Therefore, some of the early 1970s introspective singer-songwriters named above will be included, but not exclusively.

What do the individuals included in this series have in common? Although some have collaborated as writers and some have not, all have written and recorded commercially successful and/or historically important music *and* lyrics at some point in their careers.

The authors who contribute to the series also exhibit diversity. Some are scholars who are trained primarily as musicians, while others have such areas of specialization as American studies, history, sociology, popular culture studies, literature, and rhetoric. The authors share a high level of scholarship, accessibility in their writing, and a true insight into the work of the artists they study. The authors are also focused on the output of their subjects and how it relates to their subject's biography and the society around them; however, biography in and of itself is not a major focus of the books in this series.

Given the diversity of the musicians who are the subject of books in this series, and given the diverse viewpoints of the authors, volumes in the series will differ from book to book. All, however, will be organized chronologically

according to the compositions and recorded performances of their subjects. All of the books in the series should also serve as listeners' guides to the music of their subjects, making them companions to the artists' recorded output.

James E. Perone  
Series Editor

# Acknowledgments

Jointly we would like to thank series editor James Perone for his support for our project in particular and for the series overall. And we are grateful to Acquisitions Editor Daniel Harmon for his insights, patience, and understanding.

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Ben would like to thank Shari Barbour for providing safe haven literally and spiritually, and to my sister Georgia and niece Savannah (get it?) for understanding why it matters. Of course, immense gratitude and respect go to my coauthor Ken Bielen. Quite simply this book would not exist without him.



# Introduction

John Lennon showed artistic talent and leaning at an early age. The double punch of British skiffle music and American rock and roll in the mid-1950s turned his creative impulses to performing music. The Quarry Men, a group named after Lennon's school and formed and led by him at age 16, developed over the next three years into The Beatles, the most significant of all rock music combos. Key among this development was Lennon's meeting and forming a musical partnership with Paul McCartney. At McCartney's suggestion and with his example, the two young men began composing songs jointly and separately.

Lennon enrolled in Liverpool Art College as The Beatles honed their skills by performing in the Liverpool area and then in Hamburg, Germany. By late 1962, Lennon and The Beatles were on the British music charts, and within several months "Beatlemania" was born and spreading, reaching the United States in full force early in 1964.

By the end of the following year, Lennon's songwriting had matured. As a craftsman, he could do what was required quite well, often to levels of brilliance. But for him, that was increasingly no longer satisfying artistically. Lennon's songs became more overtly personal in terms of topic, more freely expressive in terms of lyrics, and sonically more evocative. They had to say something meaningful, both in the form and the content, or to him they were of lesser value. For Lennon, a song of his was "good" if it expressed and communicated real emotions, ideas, or events, regardless of whether it was successful in terms of professional polish or chart success. The reverse held true as well. A song of his may have been excellent at the level of craft, structure, story, and harmony, but if it did not express and communicate



something vital, he considered it empty hack work and was often the most dismissive critic of his own efforts.

The Beatles' unprecedented popularity continued as musical styles and interests changed during the socially turbulent 1960s. By early 1970, the individual Beatles went their separate artistic ways, having jointly amassed 51 singles in the top 40, 34 in the top 10, and 20 number-1 hits.<sup>1</sup> In the decades since, the group's recordings continued to find both relevance and sales with new, large audiences.

Lennon's pop music innovations while in The Beatles spanned music, lyrics, and recording techniques. These innovations continued as his creative partnership with Paul McCartney dissolved and another creative partnership, with avant-garde conceptual and performance artist Yoko Ono, evolved.

Lennon continued to have erratic chart successes for post-Beatles singles and albums, having 13 charting singles and 8 charting musical albums during his lifetime, with another 6 singles charting in the eight years after his murder. Yet only one of those singles topped the charts at number one during his life. It was both his at-times discomfiting emotional honesty and his espousing of and devotion to controversial social and radical political causes in his music and otherwise that arguably hampered the mass appeal legacy he inherited as a former Beatle. Efforts such as "Mother" were not dance-floor friendly, and, excellent though it is, Lennon could not have expected the provocative "Woman Is the Nigger of the World" to have had much appeal in the pop market of 1972. A similar statement could be made regarding his more innovative work done in support of Ono; though readily available, such work did not find much favor with former Beatlemaniacs.

Yet he did release those recordings, and his status as a former Beatle at least garnered them some notice. Lennon naturally sought the largest possible audience for his music. His relishing of the experimental aside, he was, after all, a pop musician. When he could combine mainstream success with his need to say something of value, as with "Instant Karma!" or "Imagine," that was ideal.

After his greatest solo chart success and a flurry of collaborations with other performers, Lennon did not formally record for almost five years. Then, scarcely a month after the release of his "comeback" album, he was shot to death as he entered his apartment building in New York City. The resulting worldwide display of grief and memorials demonstrated not just nostalgia for The Beatles or their era in general or Lennon in particular, but recognition that Lennon had achieved iconic status. He had become a living legend. Lennon might have alternately been bemused by this and railed against it, but it had happened—and in the decades since, this process has only intensified.

But Lennon was an all-too-real flesh-and-blood human, both as frail and as strong as any. Many examples of his work, musical and otherwise, have

become available posthumously, and they illuminate the man as well as the artist. What we are left with is the intensity of his thoughts, the clarity of his questions, the concern within his humor, and the pain within his triumphs.

## SCOPE AND ORGANIZATION

As is the case with all of the books in this series, the focus of this volume is on the music, lyrics, and recordings of our subject. For this volume, that is John Lennon, but John Lennon apart from The Beatles. Some might contend that this is an artificial break, and to a certain degree it is. Yet having been made numerous times elsewhere, the case does not need to be made here for the exceptional nature of The Beatles' work and Lennon's contributions to that body of work. Compared to the academic coverage of The Beatles' material, Lennon's post-Beatle compositions and recordings, even in light of his killing, remain unfairly neglected with only a handful of attempts to do them justice.

Although this work focuses on John Lennon's "solo"—or, more accurately, post-Beatle—years, clearly, it is impossible to totally ignore his work as a singer-songwriter while a member of The Beatles. Just as clearly, his later career would not have been the same had he never been a Beatle. Much of the sociohistorical and artistic weight Lennon's post-Beatle output carries results from his having been a Beatle.

Much that is, but not all. Lennon himself saw his life's creative output as one large mosaic.<sup>2</sup> His solo artistry and influence not only illuminate what he gave to The Beatles (and what the experience gave to him), but comprise a significant contribution on their own.

More so than all but a few other pop music artists, Lennon was able to fuse experiments in technology, instrumentation, lyrics, and song form into artistically and commercially successful recordings. Whether expressing emotions, explaining philosophies, protesting social situations, or ruminating on the joys and pains of romantic or familial entanglements, few have been Lennon's equal and none his better.

The book is arranged chronologically with minor exceptions where some posthumously released recordings may be discussed then as opposed to when they were recorded for reasons explained in the text at those points. This is by no means a full-scale biography of John Lennon. Yet, as with many artists, and with Lennon more than most, the biography does not just underlay the art; it is directly and explicitly woven into it. Many of Lennon's musical creations are overt editorials on what was happening to him, or about what issues were of immediate concern to him at the time of their creation. In many instances, Lennon's biography and artistic enterprises mesh, and as a result our discussions do as well.

Obviously Lennon's post-Beatles body of work was first curtailed by his voluntary self-removal from the music industry, and then by his slaying. Yet he was incredibly productive from the start of The Beatles' recording career

until his withdrawal from recording early in 1975. Since his shooting, several composition tapes, home demos, studio recordings, and even completed songs have been released and may continue to be. But it is not the mere number of Lennon's compositions and recordings that intrigues; it is their content and quality. An analysis of Lennon's work that aims to straddle academic and mainstream audiences is, we hope, a welcome addition to the Beatles and Lennon literature available.

In keeping with the scope of the Praeger Singer-Songwriter Collection, we have focused on Lennon's musical compositions that he recorded, and have further focused on particularly notable songs from each of his albums. That said, we have not left out any studio recording that Lennon composed and completed recording during his lifetime, and we have included uncompleted compositions and recordings that we deem most significant.

In addition, we have commented as thoroughly as seems appropriate, given the focus of this series, on Lennon's significant musical works in collaboration with others (again, post-Beatles), notably with Yoko Ono. The full range of Lennon's efforts in conjunction with other musicians—whether vocal, instrumental, in composition, or in production—is discussed in the context of his other musical endeavors.

Because of his status as a former Beatle, Lennon had enormous artistic control over his work. Outside of a handful of collaborations as a "guest star," he produced all of his post-Beatle recordings, often in collaboration with Ono, Phil Spector, or both. The one exception to that rule, the *Oldies but Goldies* project, fell apart and Lennon had to take over complete control to finish the project. His recordings may have at times been unsettling enough to be censored or outright banned from broadcast or sales, but during his lifetime they were as he wanted them or they did not get released. Naturally, this does not apply to the uncompleted, posthumously released recordings.

Because the aim of this series is to provide a guide to the recordings and compositions of the singer-songwriters under discussion, we have provided a discography of Lennon's key post-Beatles recordings. The index includes all of the songs mentioned in the text, including those written, co-written, and/or recorded by Lennon; songs he recorded but did not write; and songs which Lennon neither wrote nor recorded, but which we have discussed in the text.

Lennon had a playful, adventurous, questioning, and concerned spirit. Those attributes variously imbued his artistic endeavors. Both in The Beatles and beyond, there is usually a sense of joyful wonder coupled with an intense honesty underlying Lennon's work that is frequently difficult to adequately explain. The more we attempt to put our finger on it, the more it slips away—to paraphrase something we heard somewhere. No matter what his topic—be it a straightforward love song, an angry polemic, or a surreal bit of nonsense—Lennon expressed some aspect of himself that was real, and in so doing, either clarified it for all of us or at least shed some light on it for future understanding. We hope we have done something similar with his words and music.

# In My Life: The Early Years

John Winston Lennon (later John Ono Lennon) was born on October 9, 1940, in the midst of a bomb raid during the Second World War in the port city of Liverpool, England.<sup>1</sup> His father, Fred Lennon, was a merchant seaman who had only sporadic contact with his family during the war; he moved away within a year after the war's end, having no further contact with his son until after fame had arrived. Later in life, Fred Lennon remarried and fathered another two sons. Lennon and his father had minimal contact until Fred Lennon's death in 1976.<sup>2</sup>

At an early age, Lennon's mother, Julia (maiden name Stanley), by most accounts a free spirit, turned over her son's rearing to her stern sister Mimi and Mimi's husband George Smith, though she kept in sporadic contact with him. Julia soon had three daughters by two different men. As Lennon entered his teens, she began to have closer contact with him, including teaching him rudimentary banjo playing. This deepening relationship was cut short by her accidental killing by an inebriated, off-duty police officer in the summer of 1958, when Lennon was 17 years old. Lennon maintained sporadic contact with his two youngest half-sisters (the eldest had been adopted by a family in Sweden shortly after her birth) until his slaying.<sup>3</sup>

Bright enough to be bored and disenchanted enough to be rebellious, by all accounts Lennon slid through his schooling, only applying himself to expressive projects such as artwork or writing. Talented but disinterested and directionless, Lennon spent his early teens withdrawn into a small circle of close friends, and bonding with his affable uncle George, who died unexpectedly in 1955, when Lennon was just 14.

### LYRICAL INFLUENCES

While not evident in his earliest songwriting, the short stories, sketches, and essays that made up Lennon's first two books clearly evidence the influence of the fantasy, illogic, and nonsense literary achievements of Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll, and W. S. Gilbert. What in Lennon's lyrics many have attributed to the influence of psychedelic drugs more properly has its roots in Victorian-era wordplay humor.<sup>4</sup>

Lennon's imagination and tart sense of humor were also in accord with the absurdist drolleries of such British comedy troupes as The Crazy Gang and The Goons, a humor tradition that led to Lennon's contemporaries such as Beyond the Fringe and Monty Python's Flying Circus. As Lennon's lyrical composing matured, he often combined his comical wordplay and imaginative flights, sometimes just for the absurdity itself, but often for more poetic or thoughtful ends. While such Beatles' classics as "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds," "I Am the Walrus" (where the Lewis Carroll inspiration is most overt), and "Glass Onion" are well-known examples, his post-Beatles career has numerous illustrations as will be shown.

### MUSICAL INFLUENCES

Lennon grew up during the tail end of the big-band swing era in postwar Europe, where the pop music scene was heavily influenced by the American presence through military bases, economic trade, and war recovery efforts. Additionally, homegrown artists, national and regional, from traditions such as the British Music Hall, were still very popular. For example, both Lennon and his Beatles band mate George Harrison were lifelong George Formby fans, and outtakes of The Beatles rehearsals show them playing a wide variety of popular songs, not just the expected rhythm and blues/rock and roll numbers. It may have been Paul McCartney who explicitly composed pastiche songs in these prerock-era pop music traditions, but Lennon was clearly well schooled in them as well.<sup>5</sup>

In the mid-1950s Great Britain was hit by the popular craze of skiffle, a fusion of folksy traditional tunes with Tin Pan Alley sensibilities, played on homemade or inexpensive instruments. The impromptu inventiveness had an appeal for the artistically inclined and attention-seeking young Lennon, and he formed a skiffle group while learning to accompany himself on banjo.

Nearly concurrent was the explosion of American rockabilly, rhythm and blues, and rock and roll that hit Great Britain in full force by 1956. As were many others, Lennon was entranced and excited, and pushed his skiffle organizations to incorporate this new music. Lennon's fascination with and love for the music of Buddy Holly, Chuck Berry, Elvis Presley, and others never left him. In finding them, he had found himself.