

# Thinking the Unthinkable About John Lennon

You always wonder how you will react to these things, but I can't say I was all that surprised when NBC broke into "The Tonight Show" to say that John Lennon was dead. I always thought that he would be the first of the Beatles to die, because he was always the one who lived the most on the existential edge, whether by diving knees-first into left-wing adventurism or by just shutting up for five years when he decided he really didn't have anything much to say; but I had always figured it would be by his own hand. That he was merely the latest celebrity to be gunned down by a probable psychotic only underscores the banality surrounding his death.

Look: I don't think I'm insensitive or a curmudgeon. In 1965 John Lennon was one of the most important people in the world. It's just that today I feel deeply alienated from rock 'n' roll and what it has meant or could mean, alienated from my fellow men and women and their dreams or aspirations.

I don't know which is more pathetic, the people of my generation who refuse to let their 1960s adolescence die a natural death, or the younger ones who will snatch and gobble any shred, any scrap of a dream that someone declared over ten years ago. Perhaps the younger ones are sadder, because at least my peers may have some nostalgic memory of the long-cold embers they're kneeling to blow upon, whereas the kids who have to make do with things like the *Beatlemania* show are being sold a bill of goods.

I can't mourn John Lennon. I didn't know the guy. But I do know that when all is said and done, that's all he was—a guy. The refusal of his

fans to ever let him just be that was finally almost as lethal as his "assassin" (and please, let's have no more talk of this being a "political" killing, and don't call him a "rock 'n' roll martyr"). Did you watch the TV specials on Tuesday night? Did you see all those people standing in the street in front of the Dakota apartment where Lennon lived singing "Hey Jude"? What do you think the *real*—cynical, sneeringly sarcastic, witheringly witty and iconoclastic—John Lennon would have said about that?

John Lennon at his best despised cheap sentiment and had to learn the hard way that once you've made your mark on history those who can't will be so grateful they'll turn it into a cage for you. Those who choose to falsify their memories—to pine for a neverland 1960s that never really happened *that* way in the first place—insult the retroactive Eden they enshrine.

So in this time of gut-curdling sanctimonies about ultimate icons, I hope you will bear with my own pontifications long enough to let me say that the Beatles were certainly far more than a group of four talented musicians who might even have been the best of their generation. The Beatles were most of all a moment. But their generation was not the only generation in history, and to keep turning the gutted lantern of those dreams this way and that in hopes the flame will somehow flicker up again in the eighties is as futile a pursuit as trying to turn Lennon's lyrics into poetry. It is for that moment—not for John Lennon the man—that you are mourning, if you are mourning. Ultimately you are mourning for yourself.

Remember that other guy, the old friend of theirs, who once said, "Don't follow leaders"? Well, he was right. But the very people who took those words and made them into banners were violating the slogan they carried. And they're still doing it today. The Beatles did lead but they led with a wink. They may have been more popular than Jesus, but I don't think they wanted to be the world's religion. That would have cheapened and rendered tawdry what was special and wonderful about them. John Lennon didn't want that, or he wouldn't have retired for the last half of the seventies. What happened Monday night was only the most extreme extension of all the forces that led him to do so in the first place.

In some of his last interviews before he died, he said, "What I realized during the five years away was that when I said the dream is over, I had made the physical break from the Beatles, but mentally there is still this big thing on my back about what people expected of me." And: "We were the hip ones of the sixties. But the world is not like the sixties. The whole

world has changed." And: "Produce your own dream. It's quite possible to do anything . . . the unknown is what it is. And to be frightened of it is what sends everybody scurrying around chasing dreams, illusions."

Good-bye, baby, and amen.

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## A Reasonable Guide to Horrible Noise

Christgau calls it "skronk." I have always opted for the more obvious "horrible noise." Guitars and human voices are primary vectors, though just about every other musical instrument has been employed over the years, as well as smashed crockery (e.g., first Pere Ubu album, "Sentimental Journey"), scraped garbage-can lids and bongolated oil drums (early Stooges), not to mention phono cartridges, toothpicks, pipe cleaners, etc. (John Cage, *Variations II*). You probably can't stand it, but this stuff has its adherents (like me) and esthetic (if you want to call it that).

Look at it this way: there are many here among us for whom the life force is best represented by the livid twitching of one tortured nerve, or even a full-scale anxiety attack. I do not subscribe to this point of view 100%, but I understand it, have lived it. Thus the shriek, the caterwaul, the chainsaw gnarlgnashing, the yowl and the whizz that decapitates may be reheard by the adventurous or emotionally damaged as mellifluous bursts of unarguable affirmation. And one could, if so inclined, take it even further than that: in his essential book *The Tuning of the World*, under the heading "Sacred Noise and Secular Silence," composer R. Murray Schafer reports that during the Middle Ages to which we are after all now returning "a certain type of noise, which we may now call Sacred Noise, was not only absent from the lists of proscribed sounds which societies from time to time drew up, but was, in fact, quite deliberately invoked as a break from the tedium of tranquility." Or, as Han Shan also did once advise one of his Zen acolytes at Kyoto in lieu of canewhipping the whelp, "If you're feeling uptight and truly would prefer to sail into the mystic, just chuglug