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Music and Politics

John Lennon and the Politics of the New Left

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When John Lennon was murdered forty years ago, on December 8, 1980, we believed Richard Nixon had been the worst president ever — because of the war in Vietnam, because of the repression that he called “law and order” and the racism of the Southern Strategy, and also because of his treatment of Lennon. Nixon had tried to deport Lennon in 1972 when the former Beatle made plans to lead an election-year effort to challenge the Republican president’s reelection with a campaign to register young people to vote.

In the end, of course, Lennon stayed in the United States and Nixon left the White House in disgrace. But the seemingly endless battle in the immigration courts ruined his life for the next few years. To recover, in 1975 he left Los Angeles, where he’d been living apart from Yoko Ono in a kind of exile, and returned to New York and the Dakota.

He and Yoko had a son, and he declared himself a househusband. He stayed out of sight for five years, then returned to music and public life with a new album, which opened with the glorious song “Starting Over.” Then he was shot and killed by a deranged fan.

Giving Peace a Chance

Of course, Lennon will always be remembered as part of the ‘60s. He wrote and recorded “Give Peace a Chance”; on November 15, 1969, as they gathered at the Washington Monument to oppose the Vietnam War, half a million people sang Lennon’s song, while Nixon sat alone in the White House, watching football on TV. That was one of the best days of the ‘60s.

Lennon’s politics developed through several distinct stages, each marked by a new song. And “Give Peace a Chance” was not the beginning of Lennon’s life with the Left. He had taken his first steps toward radical politics in 1966, when he and the other three Beatles defied the advice of their manager and publicly denounced the war in Vietnam. “We think about it every day,” Lennon said. “We think it’s wrong.” That was a bold and risky move: at the time, only 10 percent of the American public agreed.

Lennon addressed the Left directly the year before “Give Peace a Chance,” in August 1968, with a song that criticized radical activists: “You Say You Want a Revolution,” he sang — and concluded “count me out.” He complained about leftists “carrying pictures of Chairman Mao” and their “talk about destruction.” Genuine liberation, he declared in interviews as well as that song, consisted of “freeing your mind,” which could be achieved, according to Lennon, through psychedelic drugs and meditation.

But that phase didn’t last long. Lennon released an alternate version of “Revolution” in November 1968, on the White Album, that was different from the single. This one was slower, so the words were easier to understand — and after the lines “When you talk about destruction, don’t you know that you can count me out,” he added a single word: “in.” Out, or in? He made his ambivalence clear.

After he got together with Yoko Ono in May 1968, Lennon learned that in order to transform himself, he needed to join in the work of transforming the world. Instead of posing personal liberation as an alternative to political action, he and Yoko would work together on both. And he would use his status as a celebrity to challenge not only the war but also the conventions of left-wing protest.

A Song for the Movement

For their honeymoon in 1969, the couple invited the press to their room at Amsterdam's Hilton Hotel, where they declared they were holding a "bed-in for peace" — staying in bed for a week to protest "all the violence in the world." They offered the bed-in as an alternative to the traditional protest march and invited young people to create their own forms of anti-war protest — "grow your hair for peace." As a counterculture media event, the bed-in was wildly successful, provoking ridicule from the media and enthusiasm from the longhairs.

John and Yoko wanted to hold a second bed-in in the United States but were barred from entering the country — so they did one as close as they could get — in Montreal, at the Queen Elizabeth hotel. There, knowing that he was primarily a songwriter, Lennon set out to write an anthem for the anti-war movement — the result was "Give Peace a Chance," which he recorded in their hotel room with friends joining in.

In the streets, the song was sung mostly as a chant with a melody, one line over and over: "All we are saying . . ." The rest of the lyrics made it clear that this was offered as a criticism of the Left, with its analysis and arguments — "Everybody's talking 'bout revolution, evolution, this-ism, that-ism," he sang: "all we are saying, is give peace a chance."

It was a call for the anti-war movement to put aside political differences and unite around the simple demand for "peace." The Left, of course, criticized those politics, but it suited the moment of the Vietnam Moratorium march in Washington in November 1969 — and many more in the years and decades to come.

A Song for the Streets

That same fall of 1969, Lennon called Tariq Ali, one of the leaders of the British New Left, to talk politics. Ali was a leader of the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, which had organized the marches on the US Embassy in London at Grosvenor Square — big, militant events. Ali brought in Robin Blackburn, his fellow editor of the Red Mole, and Lennon agreed to an interview, which appeared in March 1971.

Now he made himself part of the New Left project: "We should be trying to reach the young workers because that's when you're the most idealistic and have the least fear," he said, adding, "We can't have a revolution that doesn't involve and liberate women." In the United States, Ramparts magazine published the interview, with a cover headlined "The Working-Class Hero Turns Red."

Lennon's conversations with Ali and Blackburn also led to a new song: "Power to the People." John sang it as a song for the streets, a marching song, a fighting song. The record was released in time for the May 1971 spring offensive in Washington, "Stop the war or we'll stop the government," which brought hundreds of thousands to the streets of the capital.

The Nixon administration responded with the largest mass arrests in US history: twelve thousand demonstrators arrested on a single day. Amazingly, "Power to the People" became a million-seller worldwide, receiving Top Forty airplay for nine weeks that spring of 1971.

Lennon and Nixon

John and Yoko moved to New York City in the fall of 1971, and he released “Imagine,” which quickly became the most popular song of his post-Beatles life. It proposes a utopia, presented in simple instructions: “Imagine no more countries,” “Imagine no religion.” Yet somehow it was widely misunderstood.

Rolling Stone called it “irrational yet beautiful.” Did they believe “greed and hunger” were “rational”? The New York Times described it as a song of “optimism.” Okay, but did America’s national newspaper of record really think a call to “imagine no possessions” to be “optimistic”? The World Council of Churches asked John if it could use the song and change the lyrics to “Imagine one religion.” Lennon told them they “didn’t understand it at all.”

In the fall of 1971, however, “Imagine” seemed to many movement people a hymn to the New Left in defeat. Activists were depressed and exhausted. Despite the largest peaceful protests in the nation’s history, combined with the most militant and widespread civil disobedience, Nixon was headed for an easy reelection.

Lennon wanted to help stop that. He met with Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin and developed a plan for a national concert tour that would coincide with the 1972 election. The idea was to combine rock music with political organizing and do voter registration at the concerts.

This seemed particularly promising in what would be the first election in which eighteen-year-olds had the right to vote. Everyone knew young people were the most anti-war constituency, but also the least likely to vote. The first US concert tour by one of the ex-Beatles would have been a huge event.

They did a trial run in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in December 1971. John and Yoko played with a new band, and fifteen thousand people heard speeches from Rennie Davis, Jerry Rubin and David Dellinger of the Chicago Seven trial, and Bobby Seale of the Black Panthers. Allen Ginsberg chanted a new mantra, and surprise guest Stevie Wonder played “For Once in My Life” and then gave a brief speech denouncing Nixon. It was a triumph.

FBI undercover agents reported to J. Edgar Hoover on the Ann Arbor concert and on Lennon’s plans. The CIA also joined in, and even Britain’s intelligence agency, MI5. Word was sent to Republican senator Strom Thurmond, the former Dixiecrat and segregationist who was at the time chair of the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee. He described the tour plans in a memo to the Nixon White House and suggested that “deportation would be a strategic counter-measure.”

Within weeks, Lennon was served with a deportation order. His immigration attorney told him his case was weak and he would have to cancel the tour. So he did.

An Instinctive Socialist

In 1980, on the day he was killed, Lennon did a long interview for a New York radio station. He said growing up in working-class Liverpool had made him “an instinctive socialist.” It gave him a deep hostility to Britain’s ruling class, a hatred of war, and a distinctive kind of verbal humor. That made it easy for him to become a rebellious working-class hero. It also made it harder for him to become a feminist; for that, he needed Yoko.

In retrospect, Lennon’s murder marked the beginning of the forty-year political crisis that culminated with four years of Donald Trump. A Republican president who proved to be more right-wing than Nixon seemed unimaginable in December 1980. Lennon was killed four weeks after Ronald Reagan was elected, six weeks before the former movie star became president.

John Lennon and the Politics of the New Left

It was Reagan, not Nixon, who said “government is not the solution, government is the problem.” It was Reagan who argued for massive tax and spending cuts. It was Reagan, not Nixon, who used federal power to attack the labor movement, in the PATCO strike (Nixon had relished his support from conservative unions, which had refused to endorse his challenger, George McGovern, in that same 1972 election.) By 1988, when Reagan left the White House, we no longer believed Nixon was the worst Republican we could imagine. Then George W. Bush started a war in Iraq, and we no longer believed Reagan was the worst. And then we got Trump.

The Republicans of our day are worse than their predecessors in Lennon’s time, but today’s movements are miles ahead of the ones Lennon joined. The summer of Black Lives Matter saw street protests not just in a few big cities but in virtually every city and town in America. Millions of people marched in the biggest protests in American history.

The marchers were multiracial and part of a movement founded and led by black women. And they skillfully combined protest with politics. Lennon would have been eighty this year. He would have hated Trump, but he would have loved the summer of 2020.

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