

Imagine John Lennon

Nobody really knew him, it seems. Seen as god or bad, he was a figment of people's imagination. And he was the most controversial, the most talented and the most problematic Beatle. Shot dead at the age of forty by a madman as he was putting the finishing touches to a new album after a long creative pause, he is both a myth and one of the greatest pop artists of the 20th century.

by Lorenz Becher, lic.phil.hist

A Lucky Troublemaker

John Lennon was born in Liverpool in 1940. His father was a sailor hardly ever home and his mother Julia, to whom he wrote an absolutely stunning and romantic love song when he was about thirty, felt too full of life to live up to the responsibilities and duties of raising a kid. So little John spent a lot of time with his aunt Mimi, who lived in another part of town. As a little boy he often had to travel between his two homes alone. So without much company in sight John learned to appreciate and use his imagination early in life.

The classic situation of a homeless child conditioned him to grow into a reckless rebel, show-off and troublemaker wearing boots and leather, singing and playing guitar in a college band. He loved to tell stories and lies, tried hard to impress the girls and at heart he was Mister Delicate Sensitive – rootless, insecure, scared, full of complexes about his chubby looks and of course constantly seeking love and affection, even though had he found it, he couldn't have handled it. He attended Liverpool Art College but he never seriously considered art as a career choice. He was a rock'n'roller from the start and he devoured the songs of his black American models: Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Willy Dixon, Howling Wolf and the whole lot. He chased women, counted one night stands, drank and smoked hard, sang loudly, experimented with drugs and lived in music clubs.

If the hand of fate hadn't placed him so generously next to Paul, George and Ringo and into one of the most amazing musical phenomena of the century, he might very well have ended as an unknown drunk or junky in the gutter, no matter how much potential he had. But luck was definitely on his side and the creative surge of the Beatles wave carried him over a number of crises, weaknesses, disasters and drug problems into the world's limelight of pop music.

Archetypal Pop Artist

From the very start John practiced the art of artistic theft with a vengeance. He helped himself to bits and pieces of music and words in the supermarket of tradition without inhibition and scruples when it served his purpose, which was mostly the creation of something new and uniquely original. Just look at the about 300 Beatles and Lennon songs and name a few that are even remotely as similar to each other as the products of most musicians normally are. The older he got, the more he experimented with the words of his songs. He also wrote poems, dadaist texts and plays. He made his own illustrations and he got involved in the creation of the first music clips, the legendary Beatles films *Help*, *Magical Mystery Tour*, *Yellow Submarine* and *Let it be*. And after the Beatles it got politics and performance art more and more. He fought for peace, against the war in Vietnam, for individual and cosmic awareness, love and understanding. His concerts, press conferences and bed-ins grew into political events. He said: "Think globally, act locally!" And he meant it racially, environmentally and socially. He was an ingenious public

relations man, a gifted clown and showman on the stage of the media world and a great agent provocateur. At a Beatles concert he once asked the majority of the audience to clap their hands along with the beat of the music and the people in the expensive seats he asked to just rattle with their jewelry. He went a little too far maybe, when he said the Beatles were more popular than Jesus Christ, but it definitely didn't diminish his fame. Officially John Lennon was also one of the most prominent advocates of the concept of being a house husband. He withdrew from the music scene for some years to devote himself to looking after his son full time. Whether he really did it or not seems to be quite doubtful, but at the time his public statement was doubtlessly an effective and powerful one culturally.

The Darker Sides

Despite his enormous fame much about Lennon's life is unknown. Various writers have tried to bring light into the darkness of the star's life and personality – with little success and great confusion as a result usually. Lennon lived the life of a recluse for long periods of time, he played roles in public and he evaded clear definitions of identity. He changed, he doubted, he was unstable and he had many faces. Every biographer has created a different John Lennon so far. The best biography I know is *The Lives of John Lennon* by Albert Goldman. (1988) Goldman is open and unprejudiced, disinterested and fair. He presents all the material he has collected objectively and he indicates his sources, neither putting Lennon down nor lifting him up onto a pedestal. Lennon clearly was a genius and a neurotic, a great man and a depressive, a hero and a weakling. He went through radical phases of self-doubt, self-hatred, self-destruction, multiple personality syndrome and near insanity. And then again he was oh so charming, warm, entertaining, spontaneous, sensitive, committed, well-read, philosophical, creative, funny, witty, quick at repartee – in short he was neither an angel nor a saint, he was a true artist.

Songs by John Lennon

The Fool on the Hill

Day after day alone on the hill the man with the foolish grin is keeping perfectly still. But nobody wants to know him, they can see that he's just a fool and he never gives an answer. Well on the way, head in a cloud, the man of a thousand voices talking perfectly loud. But nobody ever hears him, or the sound he appears to make and he never seems to notice. But the fool on the hill sees the sun going down and the eyes in his head see the world spinning round.

Imagine

Imagine there's no heaven
It's easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us only sky
Imagine all the people
Living for today

Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
No religion too
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace

Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger

A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world

You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope some day you'll join us
And the world will be as one.

Crippled Inside

You can shine your shoes
And wear a suit
You can comb your hair
And look quite cute
You can hide your face
Behind a smile
One thing you can't hide
Is when you're crippled inside

You can wear a mask
And paint your face
You can call yourself
The human race
You can wear a collar
And a tie
One thing you can't hide
Is when you're crippled inside

Well now you know that your
Cat has nine lives babe
Nine lives to itself
But you only got one
And a dog's life ain't fun
Mamma take a look outside

You can go to church
A sing a hymn
Judge me by the color
Of my skin
You can live until you die
One thing you can't hide
Is when you're crippled inside

Mother

Mother you had me but I never had you
I wanted you but you didn't want me
So I got to tell you
Goodbye goodbye

Father you left me but I never left you
I needed you but you didn't need me
So I just got to tell you
Goodbye goodbye

Children don't do what i have done
I couldn't walk and I tried to run
So I got to tell you
Goodbye goodbye

Mama don't go
Daddy come home

Woman is the Nigger of the World

Woman is the nigger of the world
Yes she is ... think about it
Woman is the nigger of the world
Think about it ... do something about it

We make her paint her face and dance
If she won't be a slave, we say that she don't love us
If she's real, we say she's trying to be a man
While putting her down we pretend that she's above us

Womn is the nigger of the world ... yes she is
If you don't believe me, take a look at the one you're with
Woman is the slave of the slaves
Ah, yeh ... better scream about it

We make her bear and raise our children
And then we leave her flat for being a fat old mother hen
We tell her home is the only place she should be
Then we complain that she's too unworldly to be our friend

Woman is the nigger of the world ... yes she is
If you don't believe me, take a look at the one you're with
Woman is the slave to the slaves
Yeh (think about it)

We insult her every day on TV
And wonder why she has no guts or confidence
When she's young we kill her will to be free
While telling her not to be so smart we put her down
For being so dumb

Woman is the nigger of the world
Yes she is ... if you don't believe me, take a look
At the one you're with woman is the slave to the slaves
Yes she is ... if you believe me, you better scream about it

We make her paint her face and dance
We make her paint her face and dance
We make her paint her face and dance