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Lennon

***His final album,
30 years old this week***

How the **Milk And Honey** sessions woke
sleepy John from his creative slumber



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The final

voyage

Thirty years on from 'Milk And Honey', John Lennon's final album, Barry Nicolson discovers an adventurous, restlessly creative spirit behind the popular myth of the settled homemaker

PHOTO BY BOB GRUEN

John Lennon at
the Hit Factory
studios on West
54th Street, New
York City,
October 1980



Thirty years ago this month, John Lennon released his final album. At the time of his death in December 1980, 'Milk And Honey' was weeks from completion, and on its release in January 1984, it picked up where its predecessor 'Double Fantasy' had left off, reinforcing the popular myth of John's 'househusband' years. Yet, while by the end he seemed to have found some measure of happiness and optimism, his journey to that point had been nothing like the Normal Rockwell-worthy picture of domestic bliss that has since been perpetuated. "According to magic," says the writer Robert Rosen, "if you project a certain message and people perceive it as truth, then it is the truth. John and Yoko's magic was successful, but it was only a tiny fraction of what was really going on."

Who was John Lennon in the last year of his life? By late 1979, he was resigned to watching the wheels from the solitude of the Dakota building, his high-gabled ivory tower on Manhattan's Upper West Side. Occasionally, an old friend would call to tell him about a gig at CBGB or try to tempt him down to Studio 54, but he had as little interest in 'scenes' as he had in *being* seen. He still loved reading about himself in the supermarket tabloids – even if the information was incorrect, which it almost always was, it was his last tether to the life he had left behind – but he hadn't spoken to the press for years.

In the absence of a public record, he kept a private one, writing fastidiously in his journals and occasionally committing his thoughts to tape. Over the years, some of those tapes have surfaced, and they make for disturbing listening. His first entry, dated September 5, 1979, begins with a description of his mother's house in Liverpool, but he quickly tires of the exercise, sighing, "This is boring and I can't be bothered doing it." Moving onto the subject of his '60s peers – Dylan, Jagger and McCartney – he talks about how "the difference between now and a couple of years back was that whenever there was a new thing out by any of the aforesaid, I used to feel a sense of panic and competition", whereas today, "I would send out for their albums... but there doesn't seem any point." He dismisses them all – "not forgetting the singing dwarf, Mr [Paul] Simon" – as "company men". From there, his thoughts meander back

"John was bored, watching TV and smoking weed"

Fred Seaman, Lennon's PA

Lennon at the Hit Factory, August 1980; (below) shooting the video for '(Just Like) Starting Over', November 26, 1980



to childhood, recalling the time when, lying on the bed at age 14, "with my hand on my mother's tit", he briefly entertained the notion of taking things further. "I always think I should have done it," he says, "presuming she would have allowed it."

The tapes reveal a man who is drifting without purpose, unsure of what he ought to be doing with himself. The birth of his son Sean in 1975 had been a life-changing event for John, and when his contract with EMI expired four months later, he took the opportunity to retire from music and devote himself to his family. Yet while John adored Sean, once the 'terrible twos' set in, the task of raising him was largely left to a nanny. He still loved Yoko, but he had a childlike dependency on her – his pet name for her was 'Mother' – that left him feeling forlorn and frustrated whenever she wasn't there, which was often. Yoko spent her days in the downstairs office or away on business, negotiating deals, making investments and buying up real estate John would never set foot on. He was lonely, affection-starved and borderline-celibate. "He was dissatisfied with the marriage," says Robert Rosen, who came into possession of Lennon's journals shortly after his death. "He wanted to spend more time with Yoko,

he wanted to hang out with her. They'd been married for 12 years, and the sex wasn't what it had been in the beginning. He was dissatisfied about that, too."

In a building long said to be haunted by the ghosts of its former residents, the Dakota's most restless spirit was flesh and blood. When Fred Seaman joined the Lennons' staff in February 1979 as John's PA, he found a man who was "bored and depressed, who spent much of his time watching TV, sometimes smoking weed. The myth of the happily retired househusband was an alibi fabricated to hide the reality that John had lost his muse and motivation to make music." Even



his political idealism had vanished. With a presidential election on the horizon in 1980, John favoured Ronald Reagan – the Republican former governor of California, who had once called for a "bloodbath" against anti-war protestors – over Democratic incumbent Jimmy Carter, whose inauguration he had attended in 1977. "John was disappointed when he was introduced to Carter, who didn't seem to know who he was," says Seaman. "The affront was made worse by the fact that Carter had been known to quote Bob Dylan lyrics. On the other hand, he'd met Reagan and



found him charming and engaging. It pleased him when Reagan defeated Carter, but it had nothing to do with ideology: he simply liked Reagan better."

All this is at odds with the image of a happily retired ex-Beatle who had found contentment in the simple joys of bread-baking and homemaking, but that there are conflicting portraits of John Lennon in the last year of his life should come as no surprise. This was a man of deep contradictions, who had once urged people to "imagine no possessions" yet owned so many of them that one of his five apartments in the Dakota served as a dedicated warehouse for hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of clothes, art and musical equipment – most of it never used. There was a duality to almost every aspect of his character, a volatile equilibrium between light and dark; "part monk", he was fond of saying, "and part performing flea".

John's mental wellbeing may have been in question, but physically at least he was looking after himself. He still smoked cigarettes, but aside from Thai stick marijuana and the occasional magic mushroom, he had stopped taking drugs, alcohol included. For the first time in his life, he was paying attention to his diet: his friend, the photographer Bob Gruen, recalls that shortly after Sean's birth, "John and Yoko decided to cleanse their bodies by not eating solid food for 40 days – everything went through the juicer. After a couple days, John told me that all he could think about was food, so he started reading cookbooks,

BOB GRUEN

fantasising about one recipe for a while, then moving on to another. During that time he started on the macrobiotic diet. When I first met him he could only put milk on cereal, but he became a pretty good cook."

Gruen also disputes the idea that John was unhappy with his marriage and that Yoko had somehow 'hypnotised' him into ending his relationship with his mistress May Pang in 1975. "John's time with May was not a 'love affair'," he says. "May was his secretary, and like many wealthy businessmen, he slept with his secretary. The whole time they were together, he was in touch with Yoko every day, asking to come home. John and May were very close, but the title of her book says it all – *Loving John*. She was loving him."

Yet Pang has always said that their relationship continued, in one form or other, until 1980. Robert Rosen says the journals unequivocally show that John "still carried a torch for May. He still saw her occasionally, but not as much as he wanted to, and he eventually stopped because he was cheating on Yoko and it was too difficult for him to carry that on. He wanted them both, but he couldn't have both. May was light and fun to be around; Yoko was heavy, but she was survival". Pang's last contact with John came in May 1980, when he called her from his hotel room in Cape Town. He had travelled to South Africa, alone, at Yoko's behest: she believed that journeying in a southeastern direction would be karmically cleansing for him. This was typical behaviour for the Lennons: since the mid-'70s, they had consulted with a council of psychics, seers and astrologists – the most influential being a tarot reader named Charlie Swan who they kept on staff – on almost every detail of their lives, from real-estate purchases to potential employees to whether or not it was safe to leave the apartment. John's belief in these matters was perhaps not as absolute as Yoko's, but he nonetheless abided by their decrees.

"Tarot and magic," says Rosen, "became a way for them to conduct their lives and business affairs. They were always looking to get the upper hand in their negotiations with Apple Records, so they applied it to that. Magic is a psychological thing – if you're dealing with somebody who believes it's real, then it's real. But, really, it was money magic: Ono had so much money that she was able to manipulate people into doing things."

Just as important as tarot was numerology. In particular, John was fascinated with the recurrence of the number nine throughout his life. He was born on October 9. His first home was 9 Newcastle Road. The Beatles' first gig at the Cavern took place on February 9, 1961. Brian Epstein discovered them on November 9 that same year. Exactly five years later, he met Yoko. He had written songs called 'Revolution 9', 'One After 909' and '#9 Dream'. Then there was Sean, who shared his father's birthday. According to Fred Seaman, this was no coincidence: "Mother's always trying to have babies on my birthday," he told him.

As he neared 40, John was growing increasingly fascinated by the sea: he had started taking sailing lessons around Long Island Sound, where he and Yoko owned a house, and he became engrossed in books about nautical warfare and celestial navigation. That summer, he tasked his sailing instructor Tyler Coneys with finding a boat →

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The storytellers

Lennon's confidants and collaborators

Fred Seaman

Served as Lennon's personal assistant from February 1979 until his death in December 1980, spending almost every day in his company. In 1992 he published *The Last Days of John Lennon*, a terrific memoir of his time in Lennon's service.

Bob Gruen

The legendary rock photographer who met John and Yoko in 1971. He became a friend and confidant of the Lennons and remains close with Yoko to this day. In 2005 he published a volume of Lennon photographs titled *John Lennon: The New York Years*.

Robert Rosen

The author (left) of *Nowhere Man: The Final Days Of John Lennon*, written from his first-hand knowledge of Lennon's journals. His latest book is titled *Beaver Street: A History of Modern Pornography*.



Earl Slick

Slick (right) played guitar on 'Double Fantasy' and 'Milk And Honey', but is perhaps best known for his work with David Bowie, having appeared on numerous albums with him since 1974, from 'Young Americans' right up to 2013's 'The Next Day'.



Tony Davilio

Served as the arranger on 'Double Fantasy' and 'Milk And Honey', winning a Grammy for his work on the former. More recently, he has written a book, *The Lennon Sessions*, about his experiences of making the records.

George Small

Played keyboards on 'Double Fantasy' and 'Milk And Honey' and is a successful composer in his own right. Other artists he has worked with include Carl Perkins, Eric Clapton and Graham Parker.

and crew to sail to Bermuda. The destination, of course, was not picked at random: like South Africa, Bermuda lay southeast of New York, and was deemed karmically 'safe'. Coneys soon hired a boat, the Megan Jaye, a 43-foot sloop captained by an experienced skipper named Hank Halsted, and on June 4, the five-man crew – John, Halsted, Coneys and two of his cousins – set sail from Newport, Rhode Island.

The voyage started off smooth and serene, but what the seers hadn't taken into account was that the 700-mile tract between Newport and Bermuda is one of the most unpredictable stretches of ocean in the world. Two days in, the weather abruptly changed and the Megan Jaye found herself in the midst of a violent mid-Atlantic storm, incapacitating the Coneys with seasickness and leaving John and Halsted to navigate the sloop through the 20-foot waves crashing off her bow. Exhausted from 48 sleepless hours at the helm, the captain eventually had no choice but to turn the boat over to its most inexperienced crew member, who was sceptical that his "little guitar-playing muscles" were up to the task.

Six hours later, when Halsted woke from his sleep, he found a man in a state of rapture. Stood alone at the helm with the elements raging around him, John raged right back at

them, bellowing curses and half-remembered sea shanties from his childhood in Liverpool. He had spent the last few years adrift on a sea of ennui; here, in the eye of a maelstrom that all his money, celebrity and psychic advisors could do nothing to quell, he finally felt alive again.

When the boat eventually docked in Bermuda, the John Lennon who stepped ashore was not the same man who had boarded at Newport. During his fallow years in the Dakota, John would start songs but never finish them; now, in a rented villa on the outskirts of Hamilton, they suddenly came pouring out of him. Fred Seaman, who arrived with Sean a few days later and who appears on some of those formative tape-recorder demos, believes that "steering the boat through that storm reawakened some primal confidence in John. I was aware that I was witnessing the rebirth of a creative genius who'd been dormant for too many years".

Yoko was thrilled by John's rediscovery of his muse, and started laying the groundwork for a new album to be produced by Jack Douglas, the Aerosmith producer who had helped engineer 'Imagine'. According to Seaman, however, while the theme of family and domesticity was always paramount in John's mind, his vision for the albums that

became 'Double Fantasy' and 'Milk And Honey' was originally quite different.

"Yoko told John that she intended to do her own record, to be released simultaneously with his," he says. "At first John was furious and resisted. He wasn't inclined to share the spotlight. Once he agreed to the idea, she upped the ante and suggested they share an LP, with his songs on one side and hers on the other. Again, John resisted, but she eventually got her way. The concept of alternating songs – the "heart play" – was Yoko's friend Sam Green's idea. Yoko worried that if John's songs were on one side and hers were on the other, most people wouldn't bother to listen to her music, so Sam suggested that if the songs alternated, listeners would have no choice but to listen to her songs too. Sam also suggested invoking the poets Robert and Elizabeth Browning. John and Yoko then sold the fairytale version of the genesis of 'Double

John and Yoko
outside the Dakota
building, NYC,
November 21, 1980



Fantasy' to a gullible public and the myth became accepted truth."

Nevertheless, once the Lennons arrived at the Hit Factory studio in midtown Manhattan in early August, the sessions moved remarkably quickly – after the band of top-end session players assembled by Jack Douglas' business partner Stan Vincent had been screened for their astrological compatibility, that is. At first, arranger Tony Davilio thought this merely an inconvenient quirk; later, it

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Inside 'Milk And Honey'

YOKO ONO SAYS

"'Double Fantasy' was to show that we lived together and had separate fantasies but could be in harmony; two different sounds, not in unison but in harmony. In 'Milk And Honey' we're showing that John and I could go through the

same differences but in the end be saying 'I love you'.

WHAT WE SAID THEN

"'Milk And Honey' is an incomplete conversational medium... a fugitive piece perhaps, or literary remains."

WHAT WE SAY NOW

Like any posthumous release, it's a mixed bag, with at least three great Lennon songs, but marred by sketchiness. Yoko's material is the real surprise: 'Don't Be Scared' and 'Your Hands' are the equal of any of her late husband's tracks.



► THE DETAILS

- **TITLE** Milk And Honey ► **RELEASE DATE** January 27, 1984
- **PRODUCERS** John Lennon, Yoko Ono, Jack Douglas (uncredited)
- **RECORDED** The Hit Factory, New York City, August-December 1980 ► **TRACKLIST** ►1. I'm Stepping Out ►2. Sleepless Night; ►3. I Don't Wanna Face It ►4. Don't Be Scared ►5. Nobody Told Me ►6. O' Sanity ►7. Borrowed Time ►8. Your Hands ►9. (Forgive Me) My Little Flower Princess ►10. Let Me Count The Ways ►11. Grow Old With Me ►12. You're The One



Although John privately

worried about his voice and his place in the post-punk musical landscape, he was always in his element when leading a group of musicians. As keyboard player George Small recalls, "It was Yoko who was probably the most nervous and insecure person in the room. After John was shot, she became much more mellow, but at that point she didn't like anybody fooling around with her directorial authority. But it was such a unique concept to alternate her songs with John's, and that's gotta be intimidating, even if you're married to him."

It's been widely reported that at some point during the recording, having heard John was making music again, Paul McCartney rang to suggest a collaboration only for Yoko to refuse to put his call through. Even if this is true, it's likely that John wouldn't have appreciated the offer anyway: Tony Davilio recalls a separate occasion "when I was sitting in the control room with John and his assistant came over to say that George and Ringo were on the phone, and that they'd like to stop by the studio. As I remember it, John's words were something to the effect of 'politely beg them off.'"

While John wasn't as estranged from Paul as he was from George – he was enraged by how little he was mentioned in Harrison's 1980 autobiography – their relationship remained complex. According to Robert Rosen, John was delighted when McCartney was arrested with half a pound of weed in Japan earlier that year, excitedly scribbling in his journal, "McCartney busted in Japan! Go directly to jail, do not pass go, do not collect \$200!" Yet it was the release of 'McCartney II'

in May that had stoked the old competitive fires in John, the same ones that used to spur him into writing his best material. He was particularly taken with 'Coming Up', which he interpreted as Paul's cryptic call for a Beatles reunion. In response he penned 'I Don't Wanna Face It' – a song that bore a rhythmic and lyrical likeness to McCartney's, and whose title served as his answer. Ultimately, he wrote in his journal, "I love Paul like a brother, but I just don't like him."

As the sessions progressed, John was growing in confidence. He was undeterred by the lukewarm critical response to his own songs on 'Double Fantasy' (Charles Shaar Murray's scathing *NME* review wished that Lennon had stayed retired "until he had something to say that was even vaguely relevant to those of us not married to Yoko Ono") and heartened by the positive response to Yoko's more contemporary, new wave-influenced contributions. His plan was to finish a second album, titled 'Milk And Honey', in January before embarking on a lengthy world tour in the spring, beginning in Japan and culminating in a triumphant return to England, where he would sail up the Mersey on the QE2 as a conquering hero. He was also planning to incorporate reworked versions of old Beatles numbers into the setlist – 'I Want To Hold Your Hand', 'She Loves You' and 'Help!' had all been mentioned, while Tony Davilio recalls hearing a driving, stripped-back version of 'Strawberry Fields Forever', "without

"I love Paul like a brother, but I just don't like him"

John Lennon

all the orchestration and effects that were used on the original". Guitarist Earl Slick says he'd put all of 1981 aside for the proposed tour.

All of those plans came to an end when John was shot on the steps of the Dakota on December 8, 1980, having just returned from a session at the Hit Factory with Jack Douglas. His movements that day have been recorded in the same forensic detail as JFK's through Dallas in November 1963, but one mystery remains: during their time at the Hit Factory, Douglas had set up hidden mics to record every between-takes exchange, and planned to present the tapes to John as a gift, a candid audio journal of his comeback. Hours before his death, Douglas – who declined to be interviewed for this piece – apparently recorded him saying something he found so troubling, he destroyed the tape and vowed never to speak of it again. Controversial Lennon biographer Albert Goldman theorised that he spoke of plans to divorce Yoko; others suggested he may have remarked on the creepy fan he'd encountered outside the Dakota. No-one will ever know, but if we're going to speculate, why not speculate that, for the first time in longer than he cared to remember, John Lennon was happy, at peace with his past and optimistic about the future? That would be the most tragic scenario of all. ■

took on a more chilling significance. "I heard that one of Yoko's astrologers told her that nobody named 'Rick' or 'Chapman' should play on the session," he says. "I didn't know why at the time, but after what happened I was like, 'Holy shit, that's eerie.' I can't remember exactly when I heard that, but I do remember there was this one guy named Rick who was a friend of Jack's, who was really pissed because Jack wanted him on the album and Yoko wouldn't allow it."