

## In the sky with diamonds

November 23, 2010

Thursday 9th December marks the 30th anniversary of John Lennon's death. The singer's infamous assassination...in New York made a sudden and irreparable impression on society globally, equated to that of JFK. Three decades on, high profile events are being held worldwide to commemorate the musician and peace activist, such as replicating the weeklong 'Bed-In' hosted by John Lennon and Yoko Ono, and the 30th Annual John Lennon Tribute concert.

However, the variety and magnitude of tributes being performed on this particular anniversary are

not so out of the ordinary. While enthusiasm is rife as people 'come together' from all over in the most creative of ways, this isn't a one-off rarity. Alongside regular exhibitions and tribute performances in his native UK, and later home, New York, there are commemorative monuments in Iceland, Cuba, and numerous other countries that act as a permanent remembrance: it is not something that dies down between events.

For many, he died too soon. For some, they overcome this grief through full immersion into the character of John Lennon. One such fan is American born and based Tim Biancalana, a professional John Lennon tribute act, whose work consists of portraying John Lennon at events, and producing commemorative material. He sums up the universal passion: "Lennon created and was The Beatles. He was always pushing for new ideas: 'Make me voice sound like a Tibetan Monk', 'Let's do a whole song backwards.' Through his experimentation with sound, Lennon created 'loops' or 'samples', which were then extremely laborious, with the primitive recording technology of the '60s. Today it is commonplace to hear these inventions used quite arbitrarily by the pop stars that have no real message other than 'buy my record'. But John did it with purposefulness.

"He has been a hero to me ever since my older brother introduced me to the Beatles' music, when I was a small child. I actually wanted to portray Lennon as early as 5 years old."

Now an expert on Lennon's life and character, he talks as if recalling an old friend when discussing his iconography: "He was a trendsetter in all aspects, although he might be modest about it, if asked.

"I have studied Lennon's character in all its aspects. The role isn't too much of a stretch in that I have very similar ideas about politics, social issues and art. I even have naturally a similar way of mixing up words." jabberwocky-style, and a punny sense of humor.

**Mia de Graaf**

Muse Editor



“In school, as the class clown, I was slapped-up numerous times from teachers who ‘couldn’t see the joke’! Just as John was. Listening intently to interviews and practicing Beatles music countless hours for concerts has allowed me to absorb Lennon’s spirit in a deep way.

“He made cultural contributions of which many people are unaware, in poetry, music-video, film, fashion, religion, sexuality, and more. With the other Beatles, he brought Eastern philosophies, practices, and music to the west. This even includes yoga and meditation. The very first worldwide musical telecast happened to be the Beatles performing ‘All You Need is Love’. This began the tradition of benefit concerts. We all have a lot to be grateful for, on account of his individualism and innovation.

“Above all, Lennon, who actually owned up to his violent past, and in part because of it, was a man who really stood for peace and got generations to resist powerful bullies. Some of his songs have become like religious anthems in England, the US, and all over the world: ‘Imagine’, ‘Gimme Some Truth’, ‘Give Peace a Chance’ and others are still performed as if they were brand new, still full of meaning. And in a way, they are fresh discoveries, to the next generation!”

Biancalana’s extensive knowledge on the life of Lennon is a prime example of the Beatles following that feel such a strong affinity with the tragic event of December 8th 1980.

“Almost every major city in America has some kind of John Lennon commemoration for both his birthday and his death. Expect New York City to be the biggest, with crowds literally in the thousands. New Yorkers really adore John and think of him as their own.

## TRIBUTES



Tim Biancalana will be in the UK paying tribute to John Lennon with ‘John Lennon’s Poetry and Politics’ at Housmans, London ([housmans.com](http://housmans.com)), and at the Bed-In at the Bluecoat finale ([thebluecoat.org.uk](http://thebluecoat.org.uk)).

Further information on Biancalana’s events can be found at [TributeToJohnLennon.com](http://TributeToJohnLennon.com).

“On October 9th, I was in New York performing at Lennon’s 70th Birthday Celebration, and got some amazing reactions. I always do in The City. People do double-takes, they point and gape incredulously, they nudge their friends and grin and then come over to get a picture and an autograph. Going down the street, I’ll hear, ‘Hey John, how are ya?’ The older ladies politely try not to look like they’re staring. I’m curious whether I’ll get the same reaction in London and Liverpool in my upcoming trip to England!”

Like many, Tim remembers where he was when he learned of Lennon’s murder.

I was a kid, doing a drawing at the time, listening to the Beatles’ White Album. My mother came in very upset and called me to the television set. She told me, “They just said that John Lennon has been shot.” I tried to believe it was some joke, and then that it was just a wound he would recover from. I was devastated when they said he didn’t even survive the trip to the hospital. On top of this, at that very moment, the song playing was ‘Happiness is a Warm Gun’. I couldn’t handle it, I went into total despair.

“Commemorating John’s death is a conundrum, it’s still quite a sad event. Yet I’m happy to see so many people coming together to remember a man who, like Gandhi, stood for peace, only through music and art.”

Here in the UK, however, locals of the Beatles-cluttered hometown, Liverpool, can at times feel the fascination and obsession too heavy. As one of the main sources of the city's income, it does somewhat appear to contradict Lennon's peaceful purpose. At the replica of John Lennon and Yoko Ono's Bed-In as part of Liverpool's two month long John Lennon Tribute Season, I approach three people paying a loving and heartfelt tribute to Lennon's peace protest, and, ironically they guffaw at my naïve enquiry into the whereabouts of other Beatles memorials. "This city lives off the Beatles," one says as he reels off the countless sites, performances, galleries and bars you can attend to fit the bill.

Try as they may, however, you cannot escape the idolized figure Lennon maintains today, and the tragic figure he held to our parents. Lennon has been built into a timeless icon rather than simply a commemorated historical figure, despite the fact that his lifetime precedes our own and for those who never knew him alive, it is as if he has always lived this transcendent existence.

However, talking to Andrew Christophers, a University of York student in 1980, he describes the sense of shock common to many at the time: "It sounds like such a cliché remembering where you were when it happened, like when Diana died, but it really is one of those things. I remember I was in Wentworth B Block (it was an undergraduate college at the time) and I remember the year was 1980 because he lived from 1940 to 1980, it seemed so perfect, just 40 years."

Any element of boredom about the topic now is heavily masked, as Lennon is used as a figure head for promoting peace, and his actions are adapted to support modern issues today. The ongoing tribute currently being held at the Bluecoat Art Gallery is a series of Bed-Ins akin to that of John Lennon and Yoko Ono in 1969. Having started on 9th October (what would have been Lennon's 70th birthday) and will last for two months, ending on the anniversary of his death, with a different host and theme each day. The majority of themes have so far projected Lennon and Ono's protest onto wars and current controversies around the world today. For example, building a world out of Lego, playing games with wearing masks of world leaders, and a choir performing 'Sing for Peace'. One Bed-In host, Brad Rowbotham, 22,

### **Nouse reports in Spring Term 1981:**

*"The murder of John Lennon, a pop singer, in New York on December 9th has been compared to the assassination of a President. The [gunman's] shots made such an impact that they momentarily stunned men and women, young and old, all over the world. Perhaps we will always remember where we were, what we were doing, and how we heard the news of his death. But why?"*

*John Lennon provided us with so much entertainment, but also so much exasperation, and his death, after his lengthy domestic retreat, made us think about him for the first time in years. But it recalled a certain age of optimism and excitement – the swinging sixties when England and especially Liverpool was the place to be.*

*Memories slowly returned, drifting in at the end of 1980. What had Lennon done now? Had he been expelled from school, made a record or reaching number one? Had he collected his MBE from the Queen and smoked dope in a Palace lavatory? Had he sent back his MBE with a rude letter, or been photographed in a canvas bag with a Japanese artist to give peace a chance? Or had he been arrested again? No – this time he had been shot dead – murdered – to end a legend.*

*The Lennon record, past and present, disappeared from the shops. Was this the stereotyped morbid response only to be expected from a public high on tragedy? No – it was the only kind of tribute that people could pay; and what a tribute: only last week three separate Lennon singles were included in the top five chart placings.*

*The Beatles seemed so exciting and new because they were ordinary lads. They crossed previously sacred class lines and brought with them a style of flip humour which infected all levels of society. But Lennon himself went further: his childhood sorrows evoked arrogance, and a denial of compromise or pretence, even to protect the Beatles' clean image. And what the public saw at first as cheeky with, then harshness and later s just weirdness, was in fact hiding an unquenchable enthusiasm and a great originality of mind – Lennon's stunning poetic visions and inspirations have yet to be transcended."*

- AFC

One Bed-In host, Brad Rowbotham, 22, took the theme of the Afghanistan war. He describes how Lennon's actions so appropriately cater to this issue today:

"The whole essence of the 1969 protest I thought was quite relevant to today, to what's going on with Afghanistan at the moment so I wanted to try and find an interesting way to portray that in something I'd be quite interested in. Originally I wanted to write all of the names of the soldiers who had died, but in the Bluecoat programme it was planned for today [Remembrance Sunday] and I thought of drawing poppies. I thought what a lovely idea it would be to have people come in and contribute as well."

The replica of the bed has been hugely successful both in commemoration of Lennon, and as an interactive art piece in its own right.

"It's fantastic, artists from all different styles, all different art forms come down to take part. I've had a really great reaction. What I really wanted to do was to bring Afghanistan back into public interest as much as I could, and it's doing that; it's opening up discussion, which is the main thing, which fits in again with what John and Yoko did in '69, so I thought it was a really great tribute.

"The bed in protest was something that was revolutionary. It's really got a timelessness to it, and the amount of people we've had come down and take part in it now really shows what an effect they had".

At the 30th anniversary of John Lennon's death it is clear that there is no danger of us letting go of him any time soon. And with last year's *Nowhere Boy* in the cinemas, and now the recent release of the Beatles on iTunes, a whole new wave of idolatry is set to kick in.