

JOHN LENNON--THE MAN I KNEW

by
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Popular culture, I believe, is first of all what its name implies, a reflection of the needs and values of the people. And in an environment enamored of electronic mass communication, that may mean the lowest common denominator in taste and intellect. Television responds to and shapes the minds of more human beings than any medium in all history. A glance at the top 20 programs listed by computer rating--or, better, an evening spent before the TV screen--shows the result of this orchestration of science and profit.

Recently my wife Pat and I spent a week at Epcot, Experimental Prototype of the Community of Tomorrow, latest venture of the Walt Disney enterprises, in Florida. The sight and sound of Tomorrow as envisaged there seemed to hypnotize the thousands of visitors; it was mind-boggling--a Messianic showcase of triumphant corporate materialism blue-printed in Silicon Valley. I was fascinated, and also, on sober reflection, depressed. Why? Not a sign or whisper of dissent or questioning or concern for the spiritual, aesthetic and inward psyche of the human being. The ultimate achievement of supreme high-tech culture may be a machine that thinks like people, but it will also produce people who feel like machines -- the realized fantasy of Orwell's 1984. I am 84 years old. Perhaps I can find solace for my limited future; I won't have to live in such a robotized catatonic paradise.

Now, let us shift the locale of this scenario. Not a super-stupendous preview of technological marvels, but a super-star performance of pop songs. That adjective itself, a slangy version of "popular," suggests that songs have become a central prop in what that excellent introduction to this series, "Rituals of Modernity" called artifacts of culture. A hyped-up congregation of idolaters; eyes glued to a stage from which songs envelop the vast heaving sea of bodies. Their

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vocal cords and the supporting musical instruments are magnified in power by a tiny smidgeon of the same electronic energy that sped the monorail trains at Epcot --but their sound emanates from audible, visible, human individuals reaching out in an extravaganza of joy. The audience? Not silent and tense, but swept by an excess of released emotion into primal screams.

Some of you may have been young and peer-dominated enough to be among the estimated 73 million who riveted their gaze on the TV screen when Ed Sullivan first introduced the Beatles to America, on February 9, 1964. An earthquake was unleashed by the amiable impudence, Edwardian beatnik suits, pudding-bowl hair of the four lads from the dead-end streets of working-class Liverpool--and by the sad-glad, sublime-raunchy, lyrics, most of them composed by their leader, a boyhood poet, John Lennon. The seismic disturbance converted the kid-crammed studio into an uninhibited mob-scene so raucous that Ed Sullivan altered his dead-pan voice trying to control them. Too often, especially in the early stages of the new wave, gestures on and off the stage might have justified the vague term "obscene." Sociologists have surmised occasionally that the passionate outbursts among female idolaters culminated in orgasmic climax not unlike the revival meetings a few generations ago in the Bible Belt. What else can be expected of nubile girls in a sexaturated orgasm-conscious adult environment?

Actually, bobby-soxed groupies identified with their favorite singer as "the significant other." A starry-eyed Beatle-fan once told me she and a group of girlfriends played Lennon records at a given hour every evening and met at High School the next day to tell each other what happened in their dreams when they were with "him" alone. Sexual fantasies occur to every normal post-puberty person, I am told; trouble enters when we try to fulfill them. Our society is loaded with celebrity-crazed "little" people seeking escape from drab and empty lives in the imagined erotica of luminaries from foot-ball players to evangelists to handsome university professors.

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I have mentioned record albums. They are the meat and drink of the pop-song culture. Up to 1968, Americans, by official count, bought 225 million Beatle discs. One Lennon lyric in the United States and abroad sold 5 million. The accrued profits would have made Croesus seem a pauper. Isn't the astronomical dollar mathematics in the entertainment industry a stunning commentary on our prevailing standards of worth?

Johnny Carson's intake was reckoned as 1.5 million dollars a month recently, in connection with his divorced wife's suit for alimony that would afford her \$37,000 a month for jewelry and furs.

At the nadir of the Great Depression, in 1933, during a glamorous radio career which released me from a posh Manhattan pulpit (I resumed the rabbinate soon thereafter to fight Nazi-Fascism), while ex-bankers and college ~~done~~ were polishing apples for sale on New York's street corners, I received \$1500 for one week of singing love-songs to a group of flaxen-wigged damsels lolling on clouds in an alleged Valhalla as I strummed a heart-spangled plastic guitar.

Thirty-five years later, in the regal suite of the Queen Elizabeth Hotel, Montreal, rented by John Lennon for his peace bed-in with Yoko Ono at \$1100 a day, I told one of John's entourage about the Paramount episode, and the discomfort and embarrassment it caused me. Such a take, for such a phony, and at such an awful time! His instant reply astounded me. "John would understand that, Rabbi. He feels the same way."

That information proved to be correct. Intimate conversations with John Lennon gave me clear insight: although he became a millionaire at 25, he never became obsessed with money or the possessions it accumulated.

He was the major influence in a social and cultural phenomenon, the most popular group of entertainers the world has ever seen, with an unlimited turf for the free-wheeling exercise of his personality and talents. He could experiment with any combination of sounds, words, instruments, ideas, styles, methods of thinking, feeling writing and living that titillated his fertile fancy.

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Lennon was the offspring of an irresponsible seaman he scarcely knew and a happy-go-lucky songster-mother who loved life, divorced her husband and bore two daughters in an unblessed union, and yet was adored by the son she left to the care of an aunt; ^{John} he was branded as hopelessly doomed to failure by teachers; he couldn't afford a guitar and played a mouth-organ instead; Lennon scorned the trappings and dignitaries of organized authority and dreamed about non-violent revolution. Yet he grew enough in public esteem to reject an honor offered him by the Queen of England and objective enough to declaim facetiously, as he did in my presence, that, with world-wide adulation, he seemed to be an emperor, and ^{he} waxed strong enough in anti-Establishment posture to evoke a claim I made to him one day that every libertarian movement on earth owed something to his inspiration. John ^{Lennon} had need to express himself truly and give voice to the beliefs and feelings of others trapped and alienated. At the same time, he deemed his own self-image to ^{be so} absolutely invulnerable that he flaunted bizarre concepts and acts of sex and nudity.

Lennon was a complex conglomerate of all these. I recall three incidents that reveal his character.

Incident One: May, 1969. The first time I met John Lennon, he was in bed with his wife Yoko Ono, to promote the cause of universal peace. They had begun the sensational crusade in Amsterdam; 60 news reporters flew over from England in the belief (and hope) that the famous couple would copulate. I had flown from Toronto to ^{judge} for myself the sincerity of their peace-motivation. If I had entered the boudoir as a voyeur of connubial bliss, I would have been no less disappointed than the newshawks of Amsterdam. Yoko wore full-length pajamas tied around her ankles; John ^{had} wrapped himself in a kind of house-suit. And their chaste conversation reminded me of a church Sisterhood tea-party--except when John sang tentative phrases for the song he had just begun to compose: "Give Peace A Chance," which has become the anthem of the world-wide peace movement (In fact, it enlivens the ranks of European anti-missile protesters today.)

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Why did Lennon answer yes at once when I phoned for an appointment? He probably knew I had gone to Hanoi, North Vietnam in January, 1967, on a fact-finding mission and had brought back a peace overture to President Johnson; it received global media attention but none from Lyndon. (I gave John a paper-back copy of Hanoi Diary, a blow-by-blow account of the Vietnam journey, along with my first book, Storm the Gates of Jericho.) Another more subtle reason emerged during our two-hour fellowship that day. He showed profound interest in religious doctrine. I was in all likelihood the only clergyman close enough for a chat on the subject. Judaism's view of God, the after-life, sin, and what did I believe, ^{and} how ~~we~~ ^{we} can achieve the good life and the purpose of human existence. Throughout our personal contact, then and afterwards, in every encounter, I sensed a deep, almost pathetic, yearning for data and ideas of academically trained and learned men.

That longing for intellectual and spiritual enrichment, his outreach for knowledge, evoked in me a painful ~~sense~~ ^{sense} of inadequacy. How could I have the ability or the time to assuage this man's need for guidance in a theological realm of mystery no one has yet solved? And, from the moment I looked at his eyes, I was caught up in affection for the man!

Since that day I have been informed that the other Beatles disliked Yoko and resented her influence over John. He admired her singing style, asserting how much he owed to it; "more than to Dylan." She managed the massive earnings of later years, a task arising from and proving her husband's basic indifference to and ineptitude in matters of money. She stimulated his passionate dedication to peace (an inevitable impulse in a sensitive woman of Japanese descent). John Lennon will be remembered not only as an incomparable minstrel, but as a might ^{force} for peace and sanity in a fear-haunted world. He was the only Beatle who gave evidence of intense concern for the well-being of all humanity.

Above all, perhaps, Yoko set up retreats for John, where he could escape the soul-crushing impact of a pinnacle of fame: literally myriads of people crowding in on him for an autograph, ^{and} audition, a look at a script, a word to a TV producer or

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a touch of his hand. How often he lamented to me about the dizzy, all-consuming success that robbed him of the boon simple men enjoy: to be "just human, plain John Lennon," rather than a dehumanized sacrificial offering to a doting public that sought release from boredom and sexual oppression. Once my late wife Ruth and I arrived, by previous appointment, at John's temporary Toronto home to find him and Yoko absent in retreat somewhere meditating. We were delighted.

Yoko may have antagonized the other Beatles by her keen intelligence and articulateness. "Taking over," someone hinted to us. Actually, at the bed-in, she shared without demur or hesitancy in answers to rapid-fire questions from numerous press and television newsmen and thus seemed to out-pace her somewhat shy husband. I noted, however, that John made no move to disguise his pride and pleasure in her adroitness. Yoko had a fine education, as the daughter of a Japanese diplomat. There lay the secret of her domestic influence.

John's humility was further demonstrated when he pointed to the blackboard on which he had chalked his first-draft lyric for "Give Peace A Chance" and asked me for suggestions. "Add the words 'bishops and rabbis,'" I responded. He jotted them down; they are now on the record disc. He then proposed that we rehearse the entire song together, and played the tune on his guitar. I did so with enthusiasm, of course. I have since learned, from an over-view in "Newsweek" about "Give Peace A Chance," that together with Tommy Smothers, I am credited with contributing to the vocal background.

Then he said, "You ought to cut a record of your own, Rabbi." Such a project had been dimly in my mind. So I did. Here it is, with a photo on the back ^{cover} of my memorable jaunt to ~~the~~ ^a couple in bed.

Incident Two: December, 1969. Scene--television stage-set in the Toronto studio of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. John is seated between Yoko and me. Our theme will be the World Peace Festival to be produced by John on July 4th as announced by him at a press conference a few days ago. "Christmas Vigil--Peace Persuasion" John named our broadcast.

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Its reception across Canada overwhelmed us. Telephone calls jammed the lines; the Premier of Manitoba invited us to repeat the Festival in that province. Only once did John digress from a glowing account of the preparations. Why? To urge his young listeners strictly to shun hard drugs. They destroy hope, and youth must embrace hope for the future. He spoke with a spontaneity of fervor that noticeably stirred even the camera men, and impressed me enormously.

The message was fueled by experience. His rationality had barely rescued him from the disastrous effects of several trips on L.S.D. Pills were a shock-absorber at critical times of almost unbearable performance pressure. Marijuana was a common-place commodity for the Beatles. The U.S. Immigration Department sought John's deportation for possession of marijuana until persistent legal defense obtained his acquittal.

The serenity, the psychological and spiritual contentment John sought for a time in drugs eluded him. One of his lyrics called "A Little Help From My Friends" may be a drug-connected echo of that frustration. Other promising sources also failed. The Beatles made a pilgrimage to India and a Yogi, Maharishi Mahesh. It was John who told the guru about their disenchantment and imminent departure. Lennon even was lured by magic. A writer I met once boasted that he could do anything with John if he had been able to slap his hands and produce a bowl of flowers.

Christianity drew the most shocking and cynical tilt against respectability that John's spiritual loneliness ever prompted. "The Beatles are now more popular than Jesus Christ." England did not get riled, the United States exploded. Beatle records were burned in Nashville, the Ku Klux Klan came out, Beatle effigies were torched in mid-America. The gap that yawned between a poverty-scared, feisty Liverpool Teddy and the ponderous liturgies of the official hierarchy did not breed reverence. And the limitless scope allowed to top celebrities, or anyone of enormous power, can beguile even presidents and Cabinet members into unwary speech. Did not Beatle concerts themselves, for both performers and audience, usually turn into eloquent manifestos of uncontrollable animal energy? They were a force of nature, like the

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wind. The dynamism spilled over, as properly staid and muzzled authority-figures might expect, into every gesture and utterance of a creative and self-directed man like John Lennon.

He often uncorked a hot brew of disillusion and sadness after the Beatle team collapsed. Exclamations of cynicism about the Beatles' mystique, of despair over the futility of attempting to understand life, of resignation to pain and frustration and the loss of all illusions as the key to reality, of unforgiving anger at his three colleagues for their coldness toward Yoko. He could shout "I'm fed up!" I had heard about his bouts of bitterness. More and more clearly it dawned on me that John Lennon was burdened with a burn-out, a recoil from a draining of zest for life. Yoko alone administered to him the replenishment, the healing medication of meditative yet ecstatically erotic love. Now, I felt, in the crusade for world peace, he found a purpose that deserved and would receive total commitment, a reason for being totally himself, a human being trying to do the most crucial and important job ever confronted by man.

Watching him speak with charismatic inspiration about the Peace Festival, I forgot to rehearse in my mind remarks I was to make after him. My memory wrestled only with the whispered few sentences we had exchanged the night before, in a friend's house bursting with noisy strategies of Public Relations experts, the competitive flattery of hangers-on, the deliberate haste of "helping hands", and telephone calls to all parts of the earth, while Ruth and I looked at each other and felt sorry for the lionized center of the melee. Suddenly I turned to John across the small table where the four of us were chatting about re-incarnation and immortality, and said, "John, don't you sometimes wonder about all this?" His ^{grave, solemn} retort was startling. "Yes, and I don't completely trust the men running the Festival. I'll be alone, in England."

In the remaining seconds of the TV sign-off, I screwed up a daring resolve. "John, maybe you should have someone here you can trust, to keep you honestly informed," I whispered. A reply came at once. "And you, a clergyman are it. Take down my private address and phone number, ^{in England. I} trust you! . . ." On reaching the CBC limousine

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for the ride home, I told Ruth of a welcome revelation that had just come to me. With all the bravura and world-girding fame, John Lennon was lonely, and had called to a clergyman, with supposed access to God, ^{an accredited} "man of God," for support.

^{Some} of his precious lyrics, ^{such as} ~~"A Little Help from My Friends"~~, had paid tribute to the little drug pills for helping him survive. "Henceforth," I told Ruth, "I am his chosen friend, and will try to help through the God within him."

Incident Three: December, 1969. Several days before the CBC-TV show. A large room buzzing with reporters for a press conference called by Toronto's favorite celebrity, John Lennon. The biggest in the city's history, the air electric with excitement. What will he tell us? John arrived: newsmen stood up to applaud. The cynosure of all eyes wasted no time. Because Torontonians shared his hatred of war, he had chosen Mossport race track, on Toronto's fringe, as the site for a World Peace Festival. Renowned diplomats, peace advocates, the United Nations' Secretary-General, would converge on Toronto the week of July fourth from every corner of the civilized world to discuss and discover how to confront and conquer the arch-enemy of the human species: war. He and Yoko Ono had inserted a full-page ad in the "New York Times" condensing into one pithy sentence the vision and challenge of the Festival: "WAR IS OVER! If you want it. Happy Christmas from John and Yoko Lennon." (Here is a clipping of that dramatic summons.) John continued. He would ask the full Beatle crew to join him in providing music; the top-notch bands and entertainers of the earth will be invited. A half-million peace-lovers are expected to gather at Mossport, an unprecedented assemblage from across the seas and continents. And no admission charge; a free show is the sole condition for his boundless support. Later he modified the ban on a bit of private profit if used in "the cause." All proceeds from every source are to create a Foundation for Peace.

At the end, he dropped a bomb-shell at my feet. (I had been alerted to attend the debut by a member of his staff.) He would appoint Dick Gregory and Rabbi Feinberg as his lieutenants to supervise and monitor the Foundation. I accepted on the spot.

From that pyrotechnical blast-off sparks fell around the globe. Young peaceniks in Europe looked up with fresh hope. Veterans of anti-Vietnam War marches

nodded their heads. Case-hardened post-teenagers tagged as "hippies" with undeserved contempt by the callous media rejoiced that the musical revolutionary they adored had grown at last into a social revolutionary. In San Francisco and other urban centers, plans were drawn up to hire a special train for passengers to an idealized super-Woodstock. Requests to hold satellite Festivals came to me in the mail from a half-dozen cities. A public-relations firm in Miami offered its services without cost. Film companies wrote or phoned me bids for movie rights; one of the interested firms bore on its letter-head the magic logo MGM, in Hollywood. Since "Dick Gregory" (a name to conjure with) did not tie himself publicly to a fixed address, while the national media identified me as a rabbi in Toronto, I was the target.

The "good news" sucked in the usual mad-fringe addicts like a magnet. One zealot solemnly intoned to "Rolling Stones" interviewers on the Pacific Coast that "Luminaries" would fly to the Festival from outer space. Some quite canny men were lured by the smell of gold, however. Entrepreneurs with knives honed in the school of deals on the thin edge of extra-legal skull-duggery formed a corporation to promote the Festival (and "take a cut" of the millions it would predictably generate). On a drop-in visit to the sumptuous office of the out-front firm I saw currency stacked high and unattended. From what hidden cache did it come? No one knew for certain. And no information was ever given me about the specific percentage of funds for direct transfer to the Peace Foundation, despite a series of requests. The Mossport governing board refused a permit for the Festival, due primarily, the grapevine told me, to lack of confidence in the petitioners. When the secret telephone number John had given me got no answer to its rings, I sent ^{John} a cable-gram about my misgivings. His repute, and mine, were jeopardized. The date? February 22, 1970. Not long thereafter he withdrew sponsorship of the Festival. I think my danger signal simply re-enforced suspicions he already harbored.

In "Fool on the Hill," one of nearly 150 Beatle songs, Lennon celebrated a romantic idealist bemused by a dream. Did the debacle of John's festival for world peace signify traumatic naivete? More plausibly, this single-minded pursuit of peace

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was a tiny spin-off from the sacrificial passion that animated Jeremiah, Gandhi, Martin Luther King. His weapon? Song! Song wedded to electronics. Of all the arts, what is more potent for revolutionary change than the collective human voice raising a banner of protest?

The history of mass rebellion has so often borne witness to the potency of people singing together. "We Shall Overcome." Its gentle cadence of stubborn faith is heard now from the throats of West German anti-missile activists. "La Marseillaise." While Venus de Milo gazed in frozen marble, ^{from her pedestal} into the spacious exhibition-hall of the Louvre for tourists to ^{saw} and walk away, "La Marseillaise", born in the French Revolution, led starving Parisians against tyranny, for the common people to hear. "Battle Hymn of the Republic," despite its martial text, "Give Peace A Chance"--what are they but a cry for resistance to static ^{oppressive} reality? It is no accident that Joan Baez, Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, John Lennon used their gift of song to mirror despair and hope for a high-tech civilization inching toward nuclear suicide. The Hebrew Bible depicts a constant sequence: God spoke, the people listened, they moved forward to the Promised Land.

The pop musical culture epitomized by Lennon's lyric titled "Revolution" derived its radical character in reaction to current catastrophes: assassination of the Kennedy brothers and King, Watergate, Vietnam, the lingering death-odors of World War Two and Hiroshima, sexual turmoil, nuclear armament, endemic poverty. How will computer technology and genetic engineering--also a kind of revolution--shape that ^{about} culture? I don't know enough/this "brave new world" to speculate. (Besides, I'm 84 years old, and can hardly expect to live in it ^{it} except through my grand-children.)

Songs build a bridge of feeling that unites people in joy. An evening of grand opera illustrates the eternal appeal of unleashed feeling. Operatic arias ^{really} ^{emote!} And how! Singers are apt to be subject to and purveyors of feeling, often derisively termed sloppy sentimentality. Yet maybe our machine-made culture needs humanistic sentiment more than mathematical calibration. John Lennon, a Liverpudlian, pronounced it "loov."