Al Schwartz/Gamma/Liaison (1974 photo)

A hero in the works

by Kit Rachlis

As every tough-guy novelist will tell you, the thing about death is that it's ironic. And as every nickel-plated commentator has been telling us since Monday night, and undoubtedly will keep on telling us, irony surrounded John Lennon's death. Just last year he and Yoko had donated $1000 so New York City police could buy bullet-proof vests. Just three weeks ago, he and Yoko had released *Double Fantasy*, their first album in five years; the first cut and hit single announced that they were "(Just Like) Starting Over," and the last cut declared that "Hard Times Are Over." Just six hours before he was killed, Lennon had signed an autograph for Mark David Chapman, the man arrested for his murder and an ardent Beatles fan since high school. Those are just the small ironies. They get bigger.

John Lennon, who at one point really believed that love could change the world, who came to represent the best intentions (and, it should be said, the worst idiocies) of the counterculture, died when a stranger, acting for reasons none of us will ever comprehend, shot him four times. John Lennon, who spent most of his last five years regaining control of a life that had been out of his hands since he was 22 — in short, someone who was doing all he could not to turn into another rock 'n' roll martyr — became the victim of rock 'n' roll's first assassination. John Lennon, who spent most of the last 10 years trying to strip away the myth of the Beatles, trying to trash the temple that he once so skillfully created, permanently entered the region of myth as soon as officials at Roosevelt Hospital announced his death.

And there was at least one more irony. John Lennon, who in life was as brilliant a media artist as rock has ever produced (Bob Christgau's words: "He enjoys a creative relationship with his own celebrity, plying it not merely out of ambition or self-protection but because the process piques him aesthetically"), was in death the subject of a media blitz of such speed and magnitude that it continues unabated. I don't mean simply that the Gail Harrises and the Geraldo Riveras — people who five, 10, 15, years ago ignored or trivialized or pooh-poohed Lennon — were now sentimentalizing him. In a culture as instantaneous as ours, you have to expect that yesterday's scruffy contradiction will become tomorrow's gauzy greeting card. No, I mean that the media reaction was so extensive — and most of it so *pro forma* — that within hours of Lennon's murder it had become difficult to respond directly to his death. Instead, we had surrogates — the long-haired adolescent, scrunched into his too-big Army coat, eyes red with tears — feeling for us in print and on the air. This is a fundamental betrayal. Because if Lennon was more than a great rocker; if he was more than his songs, his concerts, his books, his press conferences and interviews, his happenings; if he was more than an icon of a bygone age — in other words, if he was all these things, it is because he untangled and then reconnected the wires of mass communication more effectively and with more sophistication than any pop star before him — more than Dylan, more than Presley. When John Lennon sang "Please Please Me" (1962) or said "I don't believe in Beatles" (1970), he wasn't talking to rock critics or obituary writers or TV commentators or newspaper columnists. He was talking to you.

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(John): "Where are we going, fellas?"
(The band): "To the top, Johnny!"
(John): "What top?"
(The band): "To the Toppermost of the Poppermost, Johnny!"

— the Beatles' private cheer when things looked bleak in their early days

October 9, 1940: John Lennon born in Liverpool, England. Deserted by father. Raised by aunt and uncle .... 1953: uncle dies .... 1956: Lennon forms a skiffle band (skiffle an ersatz American jug-band music then popular) called the Quarrymen. Meets Paul McCartney .... 1957: mother dies in automobile accident .... 1958: George Harrison joins Quarrymen, no longer a skiffle band .... 1960: name changes from Quarrymen to Johnny and the Moondogs to Silver Beatles to Beatles. Five-man unit (Stuart Sutcliffe on bass, Pete Best on drums) gigs in Hamburg, Germany, and Liverpool .... 1961: Beatles cut first record ("My Bonnie"). Adopt "French-style" haircuts. Take on Brian Epstein as their manager .... 1962: Sutcliffe, who has left band, dies of brain hemmorrhage. Best, who has never gotten along with band, is replaced by local drummer Ringo Starr. Lennon marries Cynthia Powell, who is pregnant with his son. A month later, the band signs with EMI, and the rest is more than a Random Note ....

"Please Please Me" becomes Beatles' first number-one single in England. Beatlemania spreads. Western Civ rocked. Beatles arrive in America and perform on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. Western Civ rocked harder. During one week, the band has the country's top five singles. *Hard Day's Night* gains them artistic rep. *Help*, a step backward, doesn't lose it. In 1965, they release *Rubber Soul*, their best album. In 1967, they release *Sgt. Pepper*, their most overrated. In 1968, they release *The Beatles* (instantly and universally known as the white album), their most fragmented .... Meanwhile, Lennon has published *In His Own Write* (1964) and *A Spaniard in the Works* (1965), which win him literary rep; has given the most provocative interviews ("We're more popular than ...."); and has become the first to strike out on his own, acting in Richard Lester's *How I Won the War* (1966). During the same year, meets Yoko Ono.

1969: Lennon marries Ono. Changes name to John Ono Lennon. Forms Plastic Ono Band. *Abbey Road*, the last complete Beatles album, is released. So is John and Yoko's "Give Peace a Chance" .... 1970: Beatles disband. Lawsuits ensue. John and Yoko enter "primal therapy." Release *John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band* .... 1971: Lennon interview appears in *Rolling Stone* ("I don't believe in ...."). *Imagine* released. John and Yoko appear at countless left-wing benefits (Attica, John Sinclair, Indian rights). Issue such singles as "Power to the People," "Happy Xmas (War Is Over)" .... 1972: Lennon's visa is revoked. Legal fight ensues. *Some Time in New York City* is released. John and Yoko perform charity concert for handicapped children in Madison Square Garden. *Mind Games* appears .... 1974: Lennon separates from Ono. Moves to LA. Drinks heavily. (Kotex on forehead in bar.) Releases *Walls and Bridges*. Works with Elton John .... 1975: Lennon reunites with Ono. Works with David Bowie. Releases long-delayed oldies collection, *Rock 'n' Roll*. Sean Ono Lennon born .... 1976: Lennon officially wins visa fight. Disappears from public view to raise son and become, in his words, a "househusband" as Yoko oversees and expands financial empire .... 1980: Lennon and Ono return to public view. Release *Double Fantasy* .... December 8, 1980: Lennon shot outside his Manhattan home.

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Those are the bare facts. They don't tell you that as a child, Lennon loved to read Lewis Carroll and to fight in the street. They don't tell you about growing up in a working-class neighborhood in Liverpool in the early '50s and always feeling shut out. They don't tell you what it was like to play seven hours a night in Hamburg, popping pills, drinking too much, reinventing yourself and — without knowing it — reinventing rock 'n' roll. They don't tell you what it was like to be voted the top group in Liverpool in 1962. And they don't tell you what it was like to have the world — for a while anyway — revolve around a rock 'n' roll group.

Most important, they don't tell you the difference the Beatles made. In rock terms, it was all the difference in the world. Until the Beatles, rock 'n' roll was strictly American; no British act had ever made it in the United States, and in Britain, no English act ever could compete with an American one. Until the Beatles, the 45 was rock 'n' roll's aesthetic unit. Though the Beatles were wonderful single-makers, they reinvented the LP by treating *Rubber Soul* as a whole and not just a collection of hits and covers. And until the Beatles, the idea of a rock 'n' roll

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group that presented itself as a group (as opposed to Johnny Cash and the Tennessee Two, say) and thought of itself as a group (they didn't commission songs, but wrote their own) was a foreign one. With the Beatles, rock 'n' roll became rock — self-conscious, increasingly respectable even as it offended, and capable of acting out its pretensions. The effects of all this were not simply internal: it is the central point of the Beatles that they made an impression on nearly everyone. The record industry went on to become a multi-billion-dollar industry. British and American culture connected in a way they had not since the Revolution. As the counter-culture grew and gained authority, a model of collective spirit was established every time a Beatles song came on. And along the way, rock stars replaced movie stars as the popular talismans of the culture.

And still, none of this tells you what it was like to hear the Beatles. It was *fun*, a combination of cheek, smarts, and irrepressible ego. When John Lennon opened his mouth, you heard the sound of someone who knew exactly what he wanted and how to get it, of someone who knew that what he had devoted his adult life to was good for a laugh, but more than a joke. It was *loud*, a combination of energy, size, and high spirits. When John Lennon opened his mouth, you heard the sound of someone who was announcing his place in the world, who was making demands. It was the sound of someone expecting to get a response. And he almost always got one, in movie theaters where the crowd sang to *Hard Day's Night*, in concert halls where girls screamed and threw jelly beans, in the *London Times* when it declared the Beatles to be Artists, in a courtroom when Paul McCartney announced that he was suing Lennon and the others and dissolving the Beatles. When John Lennon leaned into a microphone, he was expecting to hear more than the sound of his own voice in return.

Lennon, of course, was not the Beatles. If he had been, they might as well have remained Johnny and the Moondogs. Rather, Lennon was the group's muscle and wit — those street fights and books again. And in one of the few rock 'n' roll truisms that is actually true, he and McCartney provided the group's yin and yang: the sarcasm and the light touch, the sneer and the ingenuous grin, the hard look and the twinkle in the eye, the moral and the story. I doubt that the differences were so pronounced at the beginning. After all, when they started out writing together, Lennon's hero was Presley and McCartney's was Little Richard, and you'd be hard pressed to say which model rocked harder. Even at the end of the Beatles' career, long after the two had stopped writing together, they continued to preserve the *idea*, though not the reality, of their collaboration by continuing to put both their names on songs that only one had written. It's as if Lennon and McCartney, while their differences grew sharper and their recriminations dug deeper, could not give up the one quality (or, at least, the illusion of that quality) the Beatles had always embodied: their sense of unity. So for no other reason, except for an oral agreement made as teenagers, Lennon gave McCartney half the credit for "Give Peace a Chance," the first single released by a Beatle under his own name.

Robert Palmer has said that without McCartney the Beatles wouldn't have been half as popular, and without Lennon they wouldn't have been half as important — as accurate and succinct a formulation as you'll find. Inevitably, the complements eventually became polarities: pop *vs.* rock, surface *vs.* substance, craftsmanship *vs.* myth. Before the polarization, it was Lennon's grasp of modern myth-making that transformed the Beatles and us — that uncanny ability to absorb everything, from the latest fads to the most lasting contribution, and project it all back bigger than life. Lennon was the Beatles' intuition — he not only represented the culture, but anticipated its next move. (Dylan was Lennon's only peer at this, and he never had the Beatles' mass audience.) It was Lennon's shrewdness, toughness, and openness that gave so many of us so much to share. All the wires were connected. *All* the wires: like Presley, the Beatles weren't about music so much as they were about the moment.

That moment, of course, was the '60s. It's difficult to talk about the period without sounding hopelessly nostalgic or dreadfully melodramatic. And Lennon, who could babble about "surviving the '60s" with the worst of them, was no exception. But if we have created a myth around the '60s, it is because that myth is needed to say something we know is true — the culture *was* at a fever pitch, everything *was* more intense and more fun, everything *was* taken more seriously, whether it was the length of your hair or the release of a Beatles album or the love affair down the hall. It was also, Lennon realized more quickly than most (certainly more quickly than the other Beatles), a more dangerous time.

So just as he had tried to create the moment and the myth, he set out to destroy it. Few rockers have ever tried to re-create themselves the way Lennon did in the early '70s — certainly not with the same harsh willfulness. Now, it is a paradox that in dismembering the myth of the Beatles — the shared dream that he announced was over — Lennon only created a new myth, of the "I'll say anything I damn well please" truth-teller (so bugger off). Lennon had been a rock 'n' roller long enough to know that honesty was not only the best policy, but potentially the best product. The records Lennon made in the first half of the '70s are so erratic that it's often not a matter of song to song, but line to line (his most consistent records of the period are also his worst: *Some Time in New York City* and *Rock 'n' Roll*). Those albums contain some of the most brutal pre-punk rock 'n' roll ever made ("Working Class Hero," "God"), some of the most stunning songs Lennon ever wrote ("Imagine") and some of the most foolish ("Woman Is the Nigger of the World," to name just one). But then, one reason Lennon has always meant as much as he did — and you don't have to go back to his songs, just read some of his recent interviews — is that he was always willing to be as foolish in public as most of us are in private. You could be annoyed with him for the foolishness, but you had to be impressed that he still thought some things were worth testing. He still expected our response, and he was still worth arguing with.

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Like most great rock 'n' rollers, Lennon found his model, his inspiration, in Elvis Presley. As a young rocker, Lennon could see in Presley everything he wanted to be — the coolest, the best, the biggest. "I came out of the sticks to conquer the world," Lennon once said, and Liverpool might as well have been Tupelo, Mississippi. As an older rocker, the world already conquered, Lennon could see in Presley everything he didn't want to be — overweight, drugged up, cut off. In deciding to raise his son, to hand over any active involvement in his career (overseeing investments, staff, etc.) to Yoko, Lennon at the age of 36 was making the private resolution that he no longer had to be — and, more important, didn't want to be — Elvis Presley. Rock glorifies youth, and we still don't know whether anyone 40 or 50 years old can make rock 'n' roll that matters; we don't know whether a music born of adolescence can address adulthood. I suspect that Lennon, who always wanted to go Presley one better, wanted to try. He was concerned with how a rocker ages not just with grace but with value. He spoke of having 30, 40 years of fruitful, important work before him. We'll never know if he did — *Double Fantasy*, a terribly misconceived record, gives us no answers. I don't know about you, but I was looking forward to aging along with him, because if anybody had the potential to be rock's brilliant, crotchety, grand old man, it was John Lennon. I assumed I'd be arguing with him for the rest of my life. ●