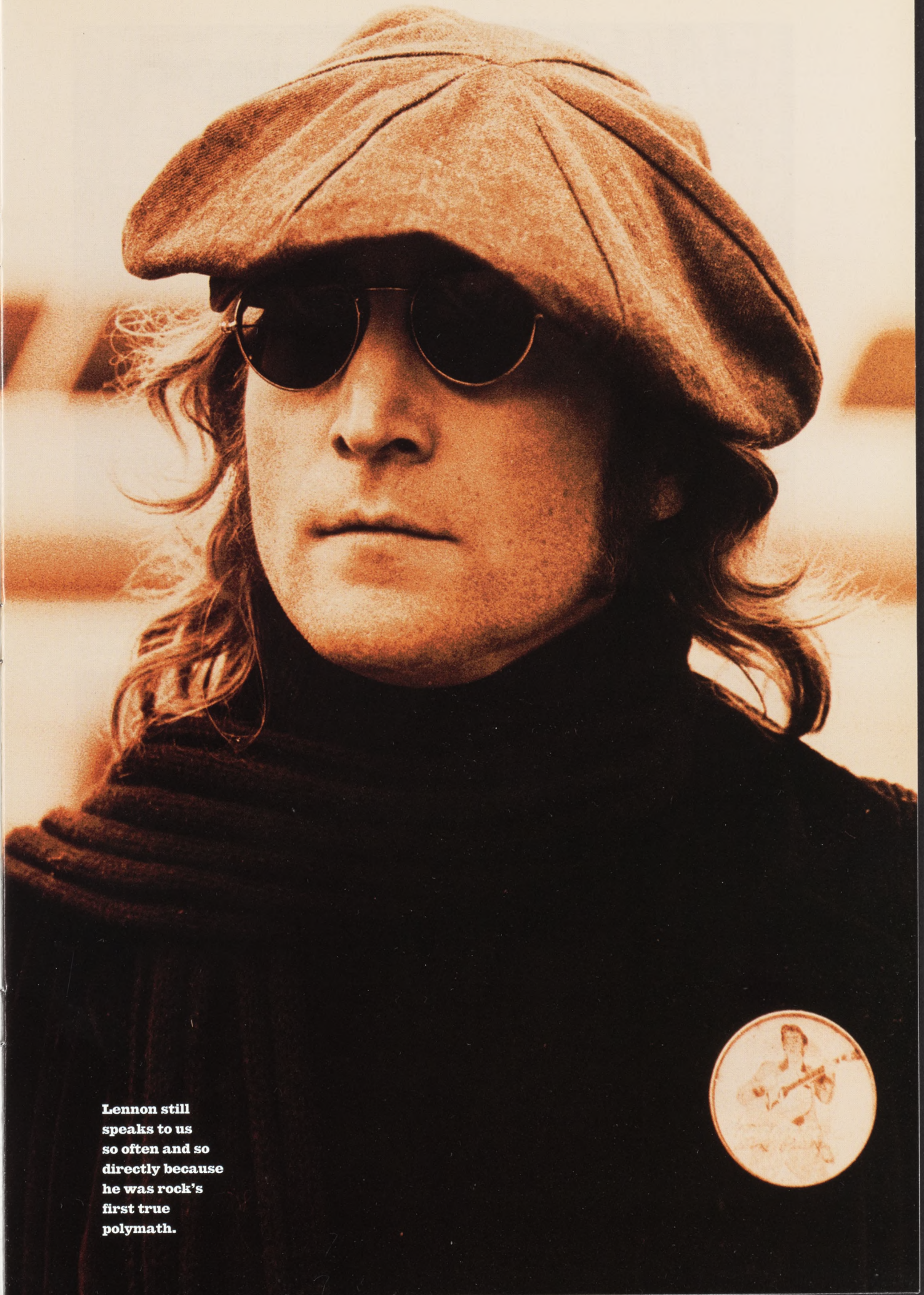


JOHN LENNON

**Calling John Lennon ahead of his time
doesn't begin to cover it. Lennon shaped his time.**

Imagine no John Lennon. A dozen years after his assassination, it remains no easier to even try. That's so not only because John should be with us tonight, feisty and fiftyish, but because in many ways, he, his music and his ideas remain with us, day in and day out, as powerfully as any figure in the history of rock & roll. Lennon still speaks to us so often and so directly because he was rock's first true polymath. Besides being a great songwriter, singer, band leader, record producer, and more than able instrumentalist, he was a prose stylist, filmmaker, political activist and above all, a magnificent wit. No one can imagine what his reaction to being inducted tonight would be like, only that it would leave us splitting our sides, wiping our eyes, nodding at its wisdom and scratching our heads at its obtuseness — perhaps all at once.

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John Lennon, Timothy Leary and Yoko Ono at the "Bed-in-for-Peace" 1969.

er it. Lennon *shaped* his time. He was the first to do many things, and the first to question the value of continuing to do many others. He was a hero and a man who demanded an end to hero worship; the central figure of the most important rock band of all time and the man who broke up that band; an advocate of the self-sufficient magnificence of early rock & roll and the artist who demolished it; an adamant avant-gardist and a unrepentant back-to-the-roots rocker. It is no mistake to say that the diverse, divergent and often self-contradictory things that we consider rock & roll to be capable of today stem more from the work of John Lennon than of any other single creator, even Elvis Presley and James Brown.

The Hall of Fame honors Lennon, the solo artist, tonight because 1994 is the twenty-fifth anniversary of his first recorded post-Beatles albums, *Unfinished Music No. 1: Two Virgins*, *Unfinished Music No. 2: Life With the Lions* and *Wedding Album*. However, it's worth pointing out that Lennon's career as a solo artist began during the heyday of the Beatles, with the publication of his books, *In His Own Write* (1964) and *A Spaniard in the Works* (1965). Both are collections of sketches, often very brief ones, that knowingly fuse Lewis Carroll, dadaism and surrealism, and the anarchically irreverent hijinks of Peter Sellers, Spike

Milligan and their compatriots (including George Martin) in the *Goon Show*, Britain's great postwar radio comedy. A similar blend marks Lennon's late Beatles songs, such as "Strawberry Fields Forever," "I Am the Walrus," "Revolution #9" and "Come Together."

His trio of 1969 solo releases, all made with his second wife, Yoko Ono, use similar reference points but with a markedly different emphasis. Lennon abandons the driving cadences and vernacular vocabulary of rock & roll, which underpin even "Strawberry Fields," for a nearly static electronic trance state and the use of sound montage and collage techniques, both related to Ono's participation in the Sixties high art movement called Fluxus. These compositions seemed more than exotic when first issued; only Frank Zappa, among rockers, had done anything similar.

That's why the album cover art of *Two Virgins* (widely banned for showing full frontal and full rear nudes of Lennon and Ono) received more attention than ever has been paid to their musical content. Many interpreted them as Lennon's abandonment of rock & roll. Subsequent developments proved them wrong, but anyway, you can't get to today's rock, which incorporates so many noisy experimenters like Sonic Youth and the Neil Young of *Arc/Weld*, as central figures, without such precedents.

Lennon reemphasized his enduring commitment to rock form with the great "Cold Turkey," then began an activist phase that also incorporated Fluxus techniques (now called "Bagism" among other things) with "Give Peace a Chance" as he and Yoko practiced their international Bed-In. These singles established the poles of Lennon's future work: "Cold Turkey" with its confessional metaphors about Lennon's drug addiction, "Give Peace a Chance" with its anthemic emphasis on a social issue.

Though he's rarely given credit for it, Lennon's first rock solo albums did as much as anything to establish the highly personalized mode of confessional songwriting that dominated white rock in the early Seventies. If anything, *John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band* (1970) and *Imagine* (1971) are more nakedly self-revealing than even the works of Joni Mitchell and James Taylor.

The impact of those confessions, which included John's recanting of his Beatles-hero status on the former and some very provocative judgments about his old bandmates on the latter, works against an appreciation of their music — even two decades later, these albums feel like news events as much as works of art. *Plastic Ono Band*, in particular, ranks as Phil Spector's most subtle production effort, and the title track from *Imagine* may be the one song with which John Lennon is today most closely identified. *Some Time in New York City* (1972) took Lennon to the other extreme. A set of explicit agit-prop songs, it represented a turn to polit-



ical radicalism, expressed in songs advocating an end to war, racism, sexism and draconian anti-drug laws. As a result, the United States government tried to deport him.

The government failed, but faced with much personal turmoil, too, Lennon spent the next few years in disarray. *Mind Games* (1973) and *Walls and Bridges* (1974) each contain memorable songs, and the latter features Lennon's last Number One single, "Whatever Gets You Through

the Night." After 1975's *Rock 'N' Roll*, Lennon's tribute to the Fifties music that initially inspired him, he underwent five years of public silence. In 1980, he and Yoko reemerged with *Double Fantasy*. Even now exceedingly difficult to judge clearly because of what happened next, *Double Fantasy* at the very least established that Lennon had lost none of his basic skill. It produced two hit singles, "Watching the Wheels" and "Woman," that together suggest that he hadn't so much reconciled his interest in personal and social issues as continued to deeply explore them. The music had Lennon's characteristic energy and polish, yet the whole project felt anticipatory — or maybe that's just hindsight.

His inclusion in the Hall of Fame required not another note more. John Lennon's name echoes wherever people sing rock 'n' roll, rock & roll, rock, or any of its other offshoots. We'll miss him tonight, but then, it's reasonable to ask on what night such a giant would *not* be missed.

—Dave Marsh



John and Yoko, double fantasy.