John Lennon
by Simon Frith

"I read the news today, oh boy . . . "

"Death of a Hero" it said in big black letters across the front of the Daily Mirror, and if I hadn't known already I'd have expected a story about a policeman or soldier in Northern Ireland. The media response to John Lennon's death was overwhelming as what began as a series of private griefs was orchestrated by disc jockeys and sub-editors into a national event, but it was difficult to decide what all this mourning meant. The media themselves seemed less slick than usual, more ragged in their attempts to respond to a genuinely popular shock. What came through was not just Beatle-nostalgia but a specific sadness at the loss of John Lennon's Beatle qualities—qualities that never did fit easily into Fleet Street ideology. "The idea", as Lennon once told Red Mole, "is not to comfort people, not to make them feel better but to make them feel worse."

The Mirror, its populist instincts currently sharpened by Thatcherism, got the mood just right. John Lennon was certainly the nearest thing to a hero I've ever had, but though I knew what this meant in fan terms (buying Beatles records at the moment of release, dreaming about my own Lennon friendship—"I'll never meet him now," said one friend when she heard the news), I'd never really stopped to think what the pleasure I got from Lennon's music had to do with heroism. "What does it mean?" called another long-ago friend who knew I'd share his sense of loss. He rang off without an answer and I watched the television tributes and tried to make sense of a sadness that was real enough but according to the politics of culture I usually pursued seemed somewhat shameful and self-indulgent. Why should I feel this way about a pop star?

The answer began to push through the obituaries. John Lennon was a hero because he fought the usual meanings of pop stardom, because he resisted the usual easy manipulations, and in the newspaper editorials, the radio interviews, the specially illustrated supplements with full colour souvenir portrait, the struggle continued—everyone was still claiming John Lennon as their friend, their cultural symbol. As Bryan McAllister put it in his Guardian cartoon, "One has only to look at the people who claim to have known John Lennon to understand perfectly why he went to live in America." As John Lennon put it himself in 1971, "One had to completely humiliate oneself to be what the Beatles were, and that's what I resent. I didn't know, I didn't foreseee. It happened bit by bit, gradually, until this complete craziness is surrounding you, and you're doing exactly what you don't want to do with people you can't stand—the people you hated when you were ten."

The most repulsive of the Lennon friends ("I knew him quite well") was Harold Wilson who explained on The World at One that he gave John an MBE "because he got the kids off the streets." "But wasn't he a bad example," snapped Robin Day. "Didn't he encourage youngsters to take drugs?" "Ah yes," agreed Wilson, "he did go wrong, later."

Lennon went wrong and it seemed then, and it still seems to me now, that a Beatle going wrong was an important political event—John Lennon knew just what sort of hero Harold Wilson wanted him to be:

Keep you doped with religion and sex and TV
And you think you're so clever and classless and free
But you're still fucking peasants as far as I can see
A working class hero is something to be.

There's room at the top they're telling you still
But first you must learn how to smile as you kill
If you want to be like the folks on the hill
A working class hero is something to be.

Yes, a working class hero is something to be
If you want to be a hero just follow me
If you want to be a hero well just follow me.
("Working class hero": @Northern Songs Ltd.)

"You know it ain't easy . . . ."

John Lennon was a 1950s not a 1960s teenager. He started playing rock’n’roll in 1956, the year of Suez, but the music
fed his sense of adult rottenness in a more personal way—
rock’n’roll was a sound made to accompany struggles at
home and school, struggles against the insinuating pull to a
career, to good marks and respectability. John Lennon
came a teddy boy and a musician as part of his erratic
opposition to the expected grateful conformities of a
working class grammar school boy.

So did the other 1950s school boys—Lennon was five
days older than Cliff Richard—but they mostly lost their
dge, softened by showbiz’s own notions of steadiness and
respectability. “Teddy boys,” as Ray Gosling puts it, were
“tidied up into teenagers. The youngsters sang one good
rock song and the next moment they were in pantomime and
all-around entertainment on the pier.” Cliff Richard called
his 1960 autobiography It’s Great To Be Young and by then
his way of being young seemed the ‘natural’ teenage way to
be.

John Lennon didn’t have such a great youth. For a start
he lived in Liverpool, a cosmopolitan port with musical
advantages (American R&B records could be heard in
Liverpool whatever the metropolitan pop industry’s success
in cleaning up white rock’n’roll) and unique material
opportunities—Liverpool had clubs where groups were
employed to play grown-up gussied music. There was a public
night life, an aggressive way of leisure that had survived
television and the rise of family consumption. The Beatles’
first manager, Allan Williams, explains the Liverpool
Sound in terms of gangs and fights and territorial claims—
the Beatles always had to stand for something, and they
 learnt to ‘entertain’ in circumstances far removed from the
London Palladium. Whether in Liverpool or Hamburg, the
music had to be loud and hard—there was no space for
subtlety or self-pity. Equipment was poor, songs were built
around the combined beat of drums, bass and rhythm guitar
(Lennon’s own pivotal role), round the combined voices of
Lennon and McCartney. The Liverpool noise was hoarse
and harsh, an effect of night after night of long, unrehearsed
sets.

While Tommy Steele and Cliff Richard were becoming
family entertainers, the Beatles were learning street survival
tactics, and when they hit showbiz their arrogance (and their
defenses) were intact. As Liverpool’s now veteran musicians
remembered after Lennon’s death, what was inspiring about
the Beatles in their Cavern days was the certainty with which
they claimed American music for themselves, and the most
striking sign of this confidence was John Lennon’s voice.
The Beatles sang American music in a Liverpool accent—
nasal rather than throaty, detached, passion expressed with
a conversational cynicism.

Lennon’s genius

Lennon’s genius is usually described by reference to his
song writing ability, but it was his voice that always cut
through. He conveyed a controlled, forthright intimacy that
enabled him to rock out in early days with a barely
suppressed fury and in later, post-Beatle days to express
remorse and optimism equally grippingly. Beatle fans
“knew” Lennon above all through this singing voice, and
perhaps all his obituarists needed to say was that he was the
only rock singer who ever sang “we” convincingly.
Certainly, when the Beatles finally had their extraordinary
success story, they were different from other pop stars. Their
qualities were not those of showbiz—they came across as
cynical, arrogant, restless. Beatle trappings came to
represent an attitude as well as the usual fan fervour, and the
Beatles appealed to a mass audience that had previously
been uneasy in its relationship to pop—sixth form, student
youth. The Beatles were the first English pop group that
didn’t insult the intelligence. They made an “underdog”
sound (to use Hobshaw’s description), pilfered from black
American sources, and retained a grittiness, an
awkwardness that couldn’t quite be swallowed up in
commercialism.

John Lennon was, in the context, the most obviously
gritty, intelligent Beatle—the one with edge. He was street
sharp as much by choice as necessity. He was a grammar
school boy who for all his rebelliousness drew on a grammar
school boy’s intellectual arrogance; he was an art school
student who retained an art school student’s radical cultural
ambitions; he was a bohemian who had learned to scoff at
“nowhere” people in Hamburg’s Reeperbahn. It was
Lennon who leapt more quickly (more desperately?) than
the other Beatles at the unfolding possibilities of 1960s rock
and youth culture, and the importance of the Beatles in
1966-8 was not that they led any movement, but that they
joined in. They became (John Lennon in particular) for all
their established star status, comrades in the mid-sixties
‘liberation’ of leisure and, what’s more, Lennon confirmed
what I believed then and believe still—that it is not possible
to separate the hippy aspects of 1960s youth culture, the
drugs and mind games and reconsiderations of sexuality,
from the political process which fed the student movement,
the anti-war movement, May ’68, the women’s movement,
gay liberation. It was thanks to his hippie commitments,
to his open response to Yoko Ono’s anti-pop ideas, that John
Lennon survived the Beatles experience to make his most
political music as the sixties came to an end.

“All I want is the truth . . .”

The week John Lennon was shot the Clash released a
three record album called Sandinista! Infuriating,
indulgent, exciting, touching, packed with slogans and
simplicities, guns and liberation, images of struggle and
doubt, it is a wonderful tribute to Lennon’s influence—a
record that would have been impossible to imagine without
him.

Lennon believed more intensely than any other rock
performer that rock and roll was a form of expression in
which anything could be said, but more importantly (in this
sense he was a ‘proto-punk’) he believed too that rock and
roll was the only form of expression in which many things—
to do with growing up working class—could be said. His
music (like the Clash’s) involves an urgent eagerness to be
heard (an eagerness which often obscured what was actually
being said). As a sixteen year-old, John Lennon heard in
rock’n’roll an anti-authoritarian voice that everywhere else
was silenced. This voice—essentially youthful— is still heard
publicly only in rock music. Where else, for example, is the
young’s own experience of youth unemployment expressed
or dealt with except in the music of local bands, on the
occasional independent record on John Peel’s show?

Much of Lennon’s musical life was about keeping this
voice, keeping its edge cutting through the ideological trappings of pop, the commercial packaging of the Beatles, the ceaseless labels of the exploiters. In coping with the trivialising tricks of the pop medium, John Lennon faced many of the issues addressed later by the punks. Yoko Ono’s position was particularly important in making the problems of Lennon’s star position explicit. She confronted him with the taken-for-granted masculinity of the rock’n’roll voice, she asked questions about musical meaning itself (particularly about the rock conventions of spontaneity and realism, about the ‘truth’ of the singing voice), she focused the problem of the rock relationship between the public and the private.

The energy of Lennon’s music had always come from this tension—between the private use of song (as a way of handling emotion, a celebration of personal powers) and a sense of public duty. Lennon was committed to public music, accepted his ‘responsibility’ to his audience (in a way that Bob Dylan, for example, did not). This was apparent not just in collective songs like ‘All You Need Is Love’ and ‘Give Peace A Chance’ but also in Lennon’s continuing attempts in the early 1970s to use his song writing skills to illuminate everything that was happening around him.

Public music depends on a material community as well as an abstract commitment and by the mid-seventies, Lennon, like most of the original rock stars (especially those isolated in international stardom), had lost this sense of audience (it took the punks to revive it). Double Fantasy, his comeback LP, reflected his withdrawal—comfortable and happy in its commitment to his wife and child and friends, it lacked the political tension that had always come from Lennon’s nervous need to account for his feelings publicly too. This was just a record to be sold. There was nothing, apparently, to be said about marriage and fatherhood that mattered enough to make Lennon challenge his audience again.

"You say you want a revolution . . ."

John Lennon understood the contradictions of capitalist music making, but he didn’t solve them, and he rarely pretended that he wasn’t involved in a money-making process. “Imagine no possessions,” he sang, but I never thought he could. There was a sloppyness to John and Yoko’s concept of peace and love and changing things by thinking them so, that concealed what mattered more—the Lenons had an astute sense of the mass market and how it worked. Their happenings at the end of the 1960s drew not only on Yoko Ono’s experience as a performance artist but also on John Lennon’s own cynical appreciation of the peculiarities of the British popular press (Malcolm McLaren applied a similar combination of cynicism and artiness to his manipulation of the media with the Sex Pistols in 1977). “Thank you very much for talking to us,” murmured Andy Peebles humbly at the end of Radio 1’s final Lennon interview, “Well,” said John, “we’ve got a new record out and I needed to talk to people in Britain.”

The central contradiction of John Lennon’s artistic life (of any attempt to make mass music in a capitalist society) lay in the unequal enthusiasm with which he packaged and sold his dreams. The problem for the working class, he told Red Mole in 1971 is that “they’re dreaming someone else’s dream, it’s not even their own.” The problem for a working class hero is that he too is defined in other people’s dreams. John Lennon was murdered by a fan, by someone who pushed the fantasies that pop stardom is designed to evoke into the appalling stupidity of a madness. The problem is that the grief that the rest of us Beatles fans then felt drew on similar fantasies, and the bitter irony is that John Lennon, whose heroism lay in his struggle against being a commodity, whose achievement was to express the human origins of pop ideas, should be trapped, finally, by a desperate inhuman, nightmarish version of the pop fan’s need to be a star.

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24 Howe and Coser, p. 375.
25 William Z. Foster, History of the Communist Party of the United States, pp. 349-50. These little known facts are also mentioned in other sources and nobody contradicts Foster. See also Jack Stachel, “The Fight of the Steel Workers for Their Union” in The Communist, June, 1935.
27 Lynd has recently published documentation of the US Steel decision in the form of a memo from Thomas W. Lamont of the House of Morgan and US Steel to President Roosevelt, explaining the rationale for recognizing the union. See “The United Front: A Note,” pp. 31-32.
28 Lynd, “Possibility of Radicalism,” p. 52.
29 Karsh and Garman, p. 106.
31 For documentation of this often observed fact see Glazer, Chapter 4, “Jews and Middle Class Groups and the Party.”
34 Glazer, p. 115 for all figures in this paragraph except where otherwise noted.
36 Small figures are given for these industries in Stachel’s report, cited above. Yet their absence from any later organizational reports is a good indicator of membership weakness.
37 Peterson, p. 6.
38 Documentation for this is cited by Glazer, pp. 115-16. For Party recruitment of state union officials see Walter Galenson, The CIO Challenge in the AFL, pp. 395-6.
40 Starobin, p. 24, and Glazer, p. 175. The Party claimed 14% in 1944-46 and often higher afterwards—Foster claims 17% in 1947-48 in his history of the CPUSA—but Glazer provides evidence that these later figures were inflated.
41 James Matles and James Higgins, Them and Us: Struggles of a Rank and File Union, p. 147.
42 Galenson, p. 134.
43 Ibid., p. 172.
44 Irving Howe and B. J. Widick, The UAW and Walter Reuther, p. 78.
45 Richmond, p. 238.