

**BRYAN APLEYARD**

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Lennon by Tim Riley

This exhaustively researched life of the Beatles' chief cynic, John Lennon, aims to get beneath the surface gloss

Mark Edmonds Published: 18 September 2011

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A rich man now: by 1966, Lennon spent money as one of his main relaxations (Robert Whitaker)

On a cold Manhattan night in December 1980, a loner called Mark Chapman pumped five bullets into John Lennon. In so doing, he silenced the one Beatle who was always the most likely to serve up an unvarnished version of the group's extraordinary story. Without Lennon, there was nobody to challenge the veracity of corporate Beatledom, nobody to add that hint of wry cynicism. And, most important, nobody to say how Lennon and Paul McCartney really got on.

Since Lennon's death, biographies of the group have been published on an industrial scale, not least Philip Norman's authorised life of Lennon — authorised, that is, until Yoko Ono read it. "It's anti-John," she said at the time. Wisely, Tim Riley, the author of this first serious biography of Lennon since Norman's in 2008, has chosen not to consult the over-controlling Yoko about his book, an ambitious and erudite project 10 years in the making. Norman was especially effective at telling the story of Lennon's life in Liverpool, the strange oedipal relationship with his mother, Julia, and the weird upbringing by his controlling aunt Mimi in a lower-middle-class Liverpool home where the net curtains twitched perpetually and the greatest crime was to be seen as "common". (Lennon was far from the Working Class Hero, though: to mark his 21st birthday in 1961, relatives gave him £100, a huge sum for the time. He promptly blew the lot on a holiday in France with McCartney.)

In contrast to Norman, Riley's strength in his well-crafted and exhaustively researched book lies in the picture he paints of Lennon's life once the Beatles had become

multimillionaires. By 1966, Lennon was living in Weybridge, in Surrey, of all places, with a wife he didn't much like and a son he didn't much know. In this strange, lonely world, he wanted for nothing — drugs, women, possessions — but he was deeply unhappy. Spending Beatles earnings was one of his main relaxations. Even when the band played Japan that year, Lennon managed to sneak out of a heavily guarded hotel suite to splurge £20,000 on antiques.

Paradoxically, what Riley calls Lennon's "crumbling inner life" gave vent to some of his finest mid-period Beatles songs: the "gleaming arrogance of *And Your Bird Can Sing*, the alternate reality of *Rain* and the shimmering cynicism of *She Said She Said*".

Riley is clear that the relationship that mattered most to Lennon, and that had the most impact, was his friendship with McCartney. Their working life together, always a mystery since it was conducted behind closed doors, is a key element in that relationship: brotherly, warm and genuinely affectionate, by the late 1960s it had also become destructive and toxically competitive as Lennon came to resent McCartney's increasingly dominant role in the studio. Riley notes that by 1967 Lennon had allowed McCartney effectively to take control of Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band, on condition that their masterpiece, *A Day in the Life*, brought the album to a stupendous climax.

Since Lennon's death, McCartney has done his best to put a gloss on these chaotic, fraught months when the band were at each other's throats. But the broad outline of the bitterness remains. The *White Album*, for instance, took nearly four and a half months to complete and "at the end of a long grinding summer...Ringo walked out". Riley says that engineer Geoff Emerick also walked away from the project, calling the atmosphere "poisonous". Part of the problem was the looming presence of Yoko — and, Riley says, the "acid tongue" Lennon would use on anyone he thought had slighted his new girlfriend.

Ringo would eventually be persuaded back, but Riley notes for the first time that the squabbles continued almost to the eve of the album's release in 1968. Relations between two of the pre-eminent popular-song writers of the 20th century can't have been helped by the fact that Lennon was on heroin, and Yoko was pregnant (she would eventually miscarry).

But the wrangles between Lennon and McCartney over the *White Album* were nothing in comparison with the *Let It Be* sessions. Recorded in a dismally cold Twickenham Studios in January 1969, they were filmed by Michael Lindsay-Hogg for cinema release. Days of shooting were edited down: the movie that eventually came out showed a band palpably disintegrating, the grim details filmed in raw, unadulterated *cinéma vérité*.

Riley describes a scene cut out from the eventual release of *Let It Be* in which Lennon has a "barbed back-and-forth" with Peter Sellers, who has dropped in to the studio to say hello. The actor sarcastically apologises for arriving without drugs, since he knows Lennon is fond of them. It is a hugely awkward exchange, with the other Beatles only too aware of the unwitting prescience of Sellers's comment. By that point only they knew that Lennon had started to inject rather than smoke heroin.

More than 40 years after its original release, there is no sign that *Let It Be*, the squalid but fascinating account of the sclerotic decline of the world's most influential pop group, will ever be released on DVD. It seems that Paul and Ringo — and for that matter Yoko — prefer a more comfortable version of history. This book certainly isn't that, which is why it makes for such a compelling account.

Virgin £25/ebook £26.05 pp765. Available at the *Bookshop* price of £21.25 (including p&p) and £26.05 (ebook) on 0845 271 2135

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