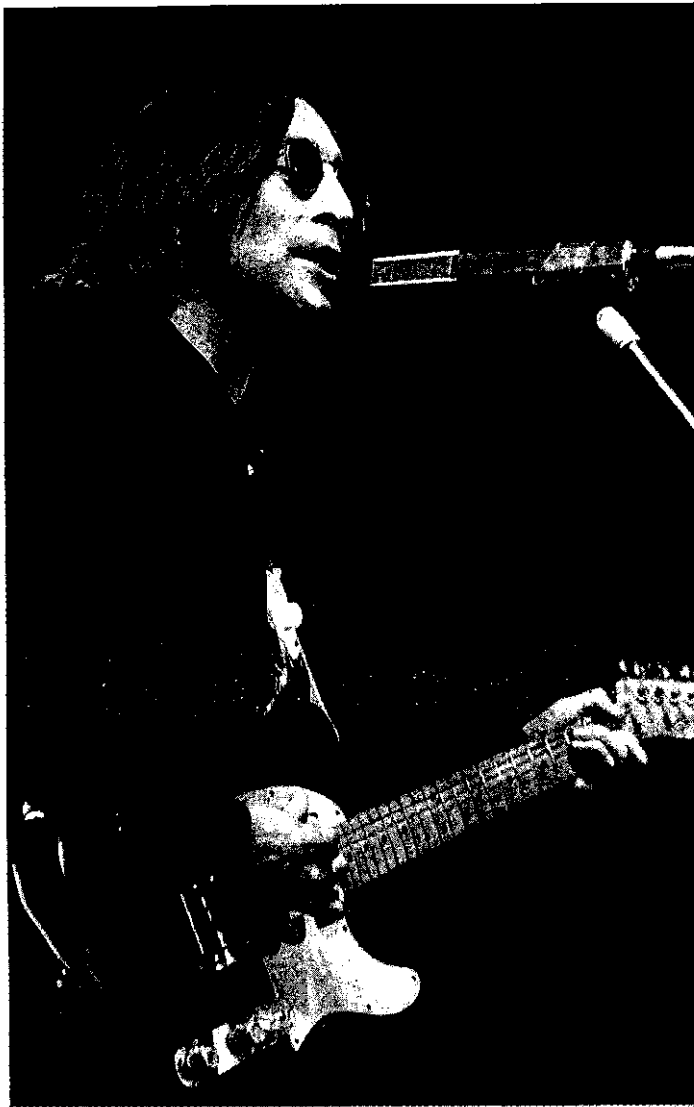


Book Review

October 9, 2011



Primal Screams

A biographer tries to make sense of John Lennon's pain.

BY JAMES PARKER

"I HATED Lennon," one of the old madcaps says, defiantly, in Jonathan Green's oral history "Days in the Life: Voices From the English Underground, 1961-1971." "Oh yes. Lennon's no hero of mine. I cannot separate people and what they do from what they are. Lennon was unmitigatedly evil as far as I was concerned." Doesn't that sound terrible, like a kind of spiritual deformity — hating John Lennon? Tangled deep in the nervous system of every earthling over the age of 40, I would argue, is some fiber

or filament of peak Beatlemania, some flicker of the old wild adoration. We want, we need — still — to love these men. And yet Lennon in certain aspects was really

LENNON

The Man, the Myth, the Music — The Definitive Life.

By Tim Riley.

Illustrated. 765 pp. Hyperion. \$35.

quite hateable. Cruel at times, chaotic, dissociated: on his bad days little more, so it seems, than a gigantic human flaw through which the shifting light of genius displayed itself.

James Parker writes the Entertainment column for *The Atlantic*.

Challenging for biographers? Disorienting? Just a bit. Albert Goldman, whose demonically readable book "The Lives of John Lennon" still haunts the field of Lennonography, thought he had found in Lennon a textbook case of multiple personality disorder. Tim Riley, in his enormous new "Lennon," is soberer but no less dazzled as he tracks his subject's "bipolar muse." Here is Lennon in the fullness of his diffracted personality, across the spectrum of his phases and faces. Leather John, mugging sailors in Hamburg — "A Lennon punch felled him to his knees" — is superseded by Beatle John, mugging for the world's press. (The reader will forgive the heavy wordplay: Riley reminds us that Lennon himself was an unstoppable punster and purveyor of

Here is Lennon's diffracted personality: Leather John, Beatle John, 'Imagine' John and, finally, John the martyr.

Spike Milligan-inspired "word fizzle.") Beatle John contains both "Ed Sullivan" John, yodeling harmonies and bending his knees in awkward demi-pliés, and "Revolver" John, acidhead, sleepyhead, drug dormouse, singing in that cold little cocoon voice (Riley calls it "time-frozen") about floating downstream and not wanting to be woken up. Then there's "Imagine" John, the drooping sage. And finally, of course, John the martyr. ... Can such variety cohere, we ask, inside a single being? It did, barely, just once, is the answer, and his name was John Winston Lennon.

About the art, "Lennon" is potently descriptive. Alan White's lopsided drum fill in the middle of "Instant Karma" (after the line "Why in the world are we here?") "tilted the whole track sideways for a few bars and then jumped right back into the groove, as if some alternate reality tore a brief hole in the song." "Mind Games," in 1973, "wafted across radio with sweeping strings doubling guitar lines, surrounding Lennon's voice like a cloud moving across a great horizon of feeling." Riley already wrote a useful book about Beatle music, "Tell Me Why" (1988), but the added biographical dimension in "Lennon" has deepened his insight considerably. His account of the writing and making of "Strawberry Fields Forever," for example, is a critical tour de force, equally in touch with the song's subterranean sources and the technical midwifery that drew it into the light. Lennon brought the song to the studio in November 1966, roughing it out on guitar for his brother Beatles and for George Martin, who later described the occasion as "a great privilege." "Suddenly," Riley writes, "their most reliable cutup had enchanted them with a reverie of youth, which somehow made him sound older — and made the others feel older as well." Woolzily regressive but sharp as splinters, "Strawberry Fields Forever" would take weeks to perfect, spiced and respiced, the finished article sounding, in Riley's phrase, "like a dream reassembled in a bottle."

At 5 years old, in a room in Blackpool, little John was given a choice: to go with Julia, his good-time girl of a mother, or with Alf, his capering, rickety dad. The boy chose his father; then he panicked, chose his mother. He ended up living with his aunt. Was this the aboriginal shattering, the moment at which he became double- or triple-natured? Or was it Julia's death in a car accident, when John was 17, that did him in? Beatlehood, for Lennon, was a state of violent irony — the beaming pop star singing "Help!" Riley returns again and again, with candid wonderment, to the fact that his subject's late-'60s creative zenith coincided with his period of maximum mental disarray: "The worse Lennon's depression got, the sharper his songwriting skills became, almost as if they were his only reliable connection with his world and peers." Diminishing returns — in this context, anyway — were inevitable. By the time we get to "I Am the Walrus" (which Riley says "could be his least humorous stab at surrealism"), Lennon is singing "from the other side of some enormous creative chasm."

Efforts to bridge this chasm — through love, debauchery, meditation, etc. — would shape the rest of his life. He shed the Beatles, he threw himself into Yoko Ono: blanketing uxoriousness. Primal scream therapy arrived on the scene, and he went for it in a big way. Arthur Janov made a trans-Atlantic house call: six weeks of private sessions in England, retching and howling. "John had about as much pain as I've ever seen in my life," Riley quotes him as saying. Primal scream could have been made for Lennon — the idea that sound, voice, a single terrible chord, could express the first cause of suffering. Unguardedly confessional, whether in the studio or on the set with Dick Cavett, he endeared himself to mouthy New York, his adopted city. In 1974, separated from Ono and thrashing through West Hollywood with Harry Nilsson at his side, he made his own little Hamburg out of a Smothers Brothers show at the Troubadour — heckling, getting thrown out, taking swings at bystanders. "Even for a cocaine-fueled Hollywood," Riley tuts, "this incident reeked of washed-up celebrity." Then came the years of hermetic domestication in the Dakota: the bread-baking and the Sean-rearing (Some travel, too, "furtive jaunts ... steered by Ono's coterie of astrologists, psychics and numerologists.") Half a decade passed, and he emerged with his I'm-so-happy-at-home album, "Double Fantasy," to big sales and (as Riley reminds us) mixed reviews. "It sounds like a great life," Charles Shaar Murray wrote, "but unfortunately it makes a lousy record."

John Lennon would have been 71 today. Riley doesn't mention Mark Chapman by name — an aesthetic decision, perhaps a moral one. Lennon's assassin is an "anonymous figure," "a young autograph hound," a specter from the half-world of fandom who irrupts into the narrative at 10:50 p.m. on Dec. 8, 1980, with five gunshots. The force released at that moment, interestingly enough, released and then globally diffused, was the opposite of hate. □