

The Night John Lennon Died

by Henry Marchand

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Twenty-five years is a long time, set beside the life span of the average human being. One quarter of a century, that's time enough to experience all the usual milestones. But sometimes it seems a blink; sometimes, something that happened twenty-five years ago remains so vivid in memory, the passage of so much time is astounding.

Assassinations. Declarations of war. Natural disasters. Political scandals. These are the kinds of public events, as opposed to personal incidents, that compress time that way.

Like December 8, 1980.

Ronald Reagan had recently been elected President, which was clearly not a good thing for those on the left in the U.S. and around the world. But he hadn't taken office yet, and in the lull it was possible to hope things wouldn't go as badly as seemed likely. Then on December 8, things went very badly, very fast.

I was in a bar called Mustache Pete's in Wanaque, New Jersey with Ron Sevean, a friend who had a radio program on the college radio station at William Paterson. And Herman's Hermits.

Not Peter Noone; he was still feuding with the rest of them then. But the rest of the band, and their "new" lead singer (Frank Renshaw, if memory serves. My notes from that evening have been lost to the decades); I believe he'd actually been with them for years by that time. Ron and I were British Invasion enthusiasts, there to interview the band about their experiences alongside the Beatles, the Stones, the Kinks, the Who; all those bands who'd been better and more important than the Hermits. Sure, it was potentially insulting to them, but we figured they had to be used to it.

We spoke with the band before they started to play and were set to tape the interview during the break between the early and late sets; when we sat down for it then, the Hermits were terrific. They'd clearly stockpiled some favorite memories of the early '60s madness for such occasions, and they were forthcoming about the personalities of their peers at the time: Mick Jagger was an arrogant prick; everyone was drunk or stoned much of the time on stage; John was nicer than Paul, though arrogance was also one of his signal qualities.

They talked a lot about the Beatles, and mostly about John. Because we'd just told them he was dead.

Word of the shooting came to us first from a girl at the bar, who'd rushed in after hearing the first report on her car radio. She was screaming, but the band was playing and it was hard to hear her. Ron heard "John Lennon," and left me at our table to go find out what had happened. As the band paused between songs, the singer asked from the stage what the excitement was about.

"John Lennon's been shot!" the girl screamed again, her face so contorted and her voice so strained she might have been laughing. "That's not funny," the singer replied. "We don't need that kind of thing here." Or words to that effect (I had them cold in that lost notebook).

The band moved on to their next song, and the little bar was loud again. Ron came back to the table and said, "We have to call the station." The bar's phone was in use, so we ran out into the bitter cold for the pay phone in a supermarket parking lot down the road. I waited outside the booth as Ron called in. I saw the news in his face before he hung up and told me.

"John Lennon's dead," he said, stunned. "Fucking Christ, Henry. It's on the wire, Lennon's dead. Somebody shot him."

We got back to the bar as the band finished their first set. We told them what we'd learned. Then we went to a tiny room upstairs and they talked about the man.

The Hermits' second set was all Beatles songs. I drank many beers and I believe I wept a good deal. There was a lot of that going on, as I looked around at the faces of people at other tables, and standing along the bar. When the show was done, Ron and I helped the Hermits load their equipment in a van and had a beer with them, too. There was a quantity of valium on hand, courtesy of a young woman who'd thought the evening called for it. It was a nice gesture, I suppose, but Ron and I knew the night was far from over, and adding mother's little helper to all those Heinekens didn't suit the agenda.

Outside the Dakotas, a crowd was already gathered. It was cold, but the assembly kept on growing. Flowers and notes hung on the gates. The location of Yoko's windows was pointed out; accurate or not, the information gave people a focus for their grief. A guy with an acoustic guitar sat on the roof of a car and led the inevitable singing. "Imagine" was hard to get through without a complete breakdown; "Give Peace a Chance" caught on big, the message not lost on the eve of Reagan's reign, which many expected to feature a belligerent United States and a massive expansion of military-industrial power.

Ringo arrived, or so it was said. People were glad to hear the news, right or not. Someone said that Clapton was inside already, some said Bowie. Elton John. Paul was on the way. We wanted to hear these names, to bandage the wound. The raw, horrible pain that came with John Lennon – *John Lennon!* – being murdered outside his own home at a time when he'd come back to us through new records, with new energy and the same fierce intelligence and love, hit us in waves, like a deep cut that throbs with the beat of your heart. Hours passed.

When the morning TV show crews arrived, things almost got ugly. They were jeered, cursed, flipped many a middle finger. Ghouls and vultures, they were called. Where were they all night while we sang his songs for his widow and cried together here where he died? Ron and I decided it was time to go. We found a diner, shared a table with others who'd left the crowd, ate quietly, wept some more.

So many tears, my own and others'. I remember those. I remember the Hermits playing "Imagine" and the small crowd at that Jersey bar singing softly beneath dimmed lights. I remember my friend Ron, pale and shaking, his feeling of personal loss a palpable thing. I shared it.

Why? Because John Lennon mattered. He was smart and he was funny and he was arrogant and he was a man who loved what he loved and who hated what he hated with utter clarity and no apology at all. He would have been an important voice in the Reagan eighties, and if he was with us today, at sixty-five years of age, it's hard to envision him quietly suffering the brutish voices that defend the use of torture in the name of humanity and who blithely dismiss the counting of war casualties who don't wear a particular uniform.

"Imagine all the people/Living life in peace"

On December 8, 2005, sadly, we still have to imagine that. But we can also remember the man who wrote the words, and who wrote "Give Peace a Chance" and "Happy Christmas/War is Over." We can remember, vividly, how it felt when he died, and how many of us wept.

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