



Lennon and Harrison’s Parting Shots: Their Last Albums Revisited

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Opinion

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Opinion

Lennon’s comeback “Double Fantasy” album is a brilliantly conceived and painfully honest musical dialogic between he and Yoko but it has never received the critical attention it deserves. It is the only evidence save subjective reports, we have of the state of John’s mind and his marriage to Yoko during his years away from the lime-light. It surely is an unprecedented in the annals of popular music for someone of Lennon’s stature to open himself up in such a way to the public’s gaze and judgement---but he is a making good on his pledge to be honest and transparent, in his life and music, going back to his “Two Virgins” album, where he and Yoko stood naked before the word. “Double Fantasy” has John and Yoko standing emotionally naked before the world, expressing their deepest feelings, including disappointment and satisfaction, about their relationship. We see, on “Double Fantasy,,” a Lennon struggling with the creeping separateness, time apart, in their relationship, arousing in him old fears of loss, though tempered somewhat by age and growth while holding tightly to the love that has held him and made him feel whole; and Yoko’s sometimes chilly, sometimes affirming and sometimes challenging responses. It is clear from their songs on this album that while Yoko harbors some ambivalence about their relationships, John is still completely invested in it and her and only fears losing her.

“Double Fantasy” was anything but a musical memorialization of the “blissful” home life of “aging hippies” or of “middle-aged tameness,” as Kenneth Womak has described it---rather it was a confessional and emotional diary of their relationship,” warts and all, with little held back, a relationship still in the process of figuring itself out, a work in progress. In dismissing the album as an expression of “comfy domesticity”

we miss the opportunity to learn and grow from it, as Lennon had intended. He said about the album that he hoped to “reach people,” to make them feel something, see themselves in it, as he was want to do with his music. He and the kids of the sixties were growing up and he wanted to let them know where he was in his life and love as he turned forty and how he was doing. “Reaching people,” as he called it, had always been a goal of his in his music, more so than Paul or George. Lennon’s music had always been democratic and inclusive. He often included himself in his message---“isn’t he a bit like you and me” and “and so this is Christmas...and what have WE done.” Womak was right, however, to tag “Double Fantasy” as the first attempt of a 60s rock star to confront, in song, the realities of growing up and of mature love---not surprising that it would be the always original and courageous Lennon who would lead the way in this regard. The Beatles, we recall, were always growing, musically and psychologically, and it can be said they led us out of the 60s and our youths and into the great adult world beyond.

Despite the apparent cracks in their relationship and in their symbiotic (oneness) bond, his relationship with Yoko, on “Double Fantasy,” is still holding. Yoko does signal some dissatisfaction with it and him, a wake-up call, perhaps, to John, in a couple of her songs. As with most relationships partners begin to see each other more clearly over time. Lennon acknowledges, on Double Fantasy, that they are physically “apart” more than he would like---and definitely more so than they were in the beginning when they were together all the time--- while trying to come to terms with their creeping separateness. It is clearly not what he wanted. He still believes, however, or wants to believe that they are “still one,” JohnandYoko” as he signed his name in the beginning; he is not yet ready to relinquish the illusion of oneness. Truth be told, the growing distance between them has aroused in him old fears of loss.



While Yoko acknowledges their creative partnership and her love for him, she also calls out what she feels she is not getting---and needing---from him. Yoko also displays her role as mentor and, at times, mother to John---someone who kept him grounded while challenging him to grow and to feel. From the beginning she wouldn't let him get away with his "jive" and "bullshit," as he once called it, and that role is amply evident on "Double Fantasy." And truth be told, that was one of the things that attracted John to her. There is no doubt that in the beginning they had a profound connection, that they were on the "same mental wavelength," as John had put it, with little daylight between them, but their symbiotic bond seems to be waning on "Double Fantasy," replaced by a more mature, complicated and differentiated love.

"Double Fantasy" is structured as alternating songs--a dialogue--- by John and Yoko, first a song by the (John), expressing some feeling about their relationship and life together and then a response from Yoko. The dialogic format gives the album a sense of liveliness, interaction and dialectic and allows the listener to engage with it. We hear clearly both sides, two brilliant artists laying out in song where they stand in the relationship. There are, in total, fourteen songs on the album, seven by John and seven by Yoko. It is left to the listener---and here the analyst--- to sort out the dynamic going on between them; John and Yoko were just being honest about what they felt.

"Just Like Starting Over" is about re-birth, breathing new life into their relationship which perhaps had become too "comfy" after all their years together, perhaps too distant. Lennon was a great believer in second chances in love, in starting over, in new beginnings and fresh starts, perhaps because he had a second chance with his mother when he was a teenager, after having been abandoned by her as a child. With Yoko he had a second chance after separating in 1973, reuniting with her in 1975. Many of his early Beatle songs have second chances in love as their theme which probably accounts for the irresistible joy in them. In "She Loves You" if he "apologizes" to her she will take him back; in "This Boy," he stands to have a second chance with his old love; in "I'll Be Back," if he is given a second chance the second time he will "not pretend." For Lennon, there was always hope of finding "real love" and after many false starts he has found it, in "Real Love." Never give up. In "Don't Let Me Down," he is "in love for the first time..." So, in "Starting Over," Lennon is hoping to reinfuse their relationship with the magic and love that had once animated it.

Lennon acknowledges in the song that they "have grown," presumably meaning learned to incorporate some separateness into their relationship but still misses the old days when they "made love" every day and were together all the time. He could be alone again with her if they "fly

away," go somewhere far away and in being alone with her he could be his best self again. At bottom he still felt "a half" and needed Yoko to feel whole, a remnant of his incomplete symbiosis with his mother in his earliest years. Being with Yoko, being alone with her, was enough to satisfy most of his needs.

The Beatles completed in 2024 Lennon's demo of "Now and Then," written around the time of Double Fantasy but not included on the album. This song is very similar to "Just Like Starting Over." In it, he "misses" Yoko "now and then"--suggesting again that they were spending more time apart than he would like--- and as in "Starting Over" he is ready to "start again," if he must, to show her how much he loves her. With distance, comes fear of losing her and that is evident in "Now and Then." Yoko and only Yoko is responsible for his "making it through," for meeting his needs, surviving and by implication without her he would be nothing. His life is "in her hands" ("Woman").

In "Woman," Lennon expresses his gratitude for all that Yoko has done for him. She has been his mentor and has "shown" him "the meaning of success." Not unlike the love-object in his song, "If I Fell," who he hoped would "help (him) understand" the meaning of love. John was looking for a mentor and mother. Yoko, in "Woman," "understands the little child inside the man," giving him what he never had as a child, understanding. Being understood is crucial to Lennon's sense of self well-being. He gives to Yoko the perhaps not entirely desired role of saving him---"my life is in your hands." It is a lot to ask of another. Again, in "Woman," Lennon acknowledges the growing gap of space between he and Yoko---"however distant"---and wants some reassurance that they are "still one." Finally, he apologizes to Yoko ("never meant to cause you sorrow"), as he had apologized so often to love-objects he had hurt in earlier songs (e.g. "I didn't mean to hurt you") or had urged his friends to "apologize" to their girl ("apologize to her" from "She Loves You") to get her back. Lennon saw such apologies as a way of getting second chances in love, though one might argue that sometimes apologies aren't enough.

"Dear Yoko" has Lennon again "missing" Yoko, even if they are apart just "one day," a short time. In her absence he "wilts like a flower." He has no complaint about their relationship other than this one, that they are apart more than he would like. While we don't hear the emotional devastation---"can't go on" was a common refrain in his songs about loss or potential loss--- that was Lennon's typical response to being left in his Beatle songs, he is definitely not yet secure enough in himself to tolerate well Yoko's absences. The sense of object constancy is not there. In "Dear Yoko," again to reassure himself and to hold onto the old illusion he declares that the "two of us are really one."

It is worth pointing out here that Lennon was in some ways as much as a “bundle of contradictions” as George Harrison. Both were complicated and fascinating men, in addition to being brilliant musicians. Lennon believed in relinquishing illusions, “possessions of the mind,” as he once described them, in facing life and self squarely, without the aid or balm of illusions. His song “God” is about not “believing in, mythologizing or deifying “Elvis...Kennedy...Zimmerman...Beatles” but he seems determined to hold onto the illusion that he and Yoko are “one.” Harrison, as we shall see, became a devout follower of Hinduism while lambasting those who are “brainwashed” and who don’t think for themselves.

Lennon comes right out and says in “I’m Losing You” what he fears most, that he is losing Yoko. They are spending more time apart---and time apart spells, for him, potential loss--- and perhaps not communicating as well as they used to, well enough that is to mediate their separateness. The old, old fear, going back to his childhood, rears its ugly head---“I’m Losing You.” Their “communication” has broken down and he can’t even reach Yoko on the “phone.” Given that this was a time pre-cell-phone, one might hypothesize that feelings around being apart were much stronger than they are today, with the means for instant communication. On the other hand, the emotions that gave rise to songs about loss or fear of loss were felt more deeply than they are today and thus the songs were more poignant and compelling than they are today. Lennon, in “I’m Losing You,” fears that Yoko is “carrying some (old) cross” and that is what is keeping her away from him; he wants her to let it go. Essentially, Get over It. It is interesting to note that as in so many of his Beatle songs the (emotional) action, in this song, turns on the act of being left or fear of being left (e.g. “the girl that’s going away” in “Ticket To Ride”) rather than on any actual loss.

Yoko responds, leaving little doubt that she is not entirely satisfied with him or the state of their marriage. There is still work to do. While for John the main problem is that they are physically apart more than he would like---but “no one is to blame” for that--- Yoko has specific complaints about him in “I’m Moving On” and “Give Me Something.” In “I’m Moving On,” she is no longer moved by his “sweet talk” and will no longer let herself be manipulated by it. “I’ll see through your jive... and window smile,” she declares in that song, vowing to not let him get away with his “phoniness” any more. She wants the truth and nothing but. John was initially attracted to Yoko because she could see through his “bullshit” and because she kept his feet to the ground. He was attracted to her music because it was “real,” just as he was initially drawn to rock and roll music because it was “real.” Realness is what he was looking for, in life, people and his relationships, having grown up in an environment where “nothing is real” (“Strawberry Fields Forever”). He penned the song “Real Love” to express what he thought he found with Yoko, what he wanted. So, it

is a bit ironic that the writer of “Gimme Some Truth” is being held to account for his falseness and “phoniness.” Yoko, in “I’m Moving On,” is essentially saying that she is growing past him, creating some asymmetry in the relationship, and that he needs to catch up. Which is probably why John felt that he was “losing” her.

“Give Me Something” is a brutally honest song, a demand that John “give her” something, something “warm.” Just occupying the same physical space will not do. In that song, his “eyes are cold” and his “voice is hard,” a stinging indictment and yet John may not even have been aware of himself. But it is a brave and honest thing to say in a song on an album about their relationship. Yoko is still invested in the relationship, though obviously disappointed in some things about it but promises that she “will give” John something in return if he just “cleans up”---which is the title of another of his songs on “Double Fantasy”--- his act and removes the hard edges in the way he relates to her.

Yoko shows her vulnerability in “Kiss Kiss Kiss,” asking--not demanding as in “Give Me Something”—for some affection. She is hurting, “bleeding inside,” some wound we gather from her childhood, and wants the tenderness of a kiss but not too much----“one kiss will do,” which seems to suggest she didn’t want to be smothered with affection. We know from John’s Beatles songs that he tended to over-give and perhaps Yoko is referring to that. “Kiss Kiss Kiss” does leave us curious to know more about the pain inside she has been carrying. But it is a clue that the two were kindred souls in this respect, both carrying within them unresolved hurts from their past.

Yoko melts back into one, agreeing that they are one---“yes our hearts are one”---in “I’m Your Angel.” She resumes her role as sorceress with “magical powers” who can make all his “wishes come true” and he is her “fairy” who has “given her everything she ever wanted from life.” She is his, “in his pocket” in this song. All is well and their relationship is hitting on all cylinders. Their fertile imaginations and creative minds still animate their relationship; they still “believe in pumpkins that turn into princes” and “house built in the sky.” It is interesting to think about the contradictions between Yoko, on the one hand, wanting something real from John and, on the other her, be an active participant in their fantasy/imaginative world.

Finally, in “Beautiful Boys,” Yoko admires Lennon’s genius, a “mind that changed the world,” while challenging him to continue to grow, create and feel. Despite all that he has accomplished he still feels “empty” inside. She understands, to quote from “Woman,” discussed above, the “little child inside the man,” with all his little “toys” and “plans and schemes” (“Real Love,” Lennon) and that becomes

a message to all boys and men; “don’t be afraid” to feel pain, to suffer if need be, to live.

“Double Fantasy” is an amazing musical-psychological document, two brilliant artists baring their hearts and souls for the world to see. It shows a Lennon still deeply in love but struggling to come to terms with the growing distance between himself and Yoko. And a Yoko still deeply in love but increasingly dissatisfied with John’s coldness and “phoniness,” needing more from him. Just as Lennon got a second chance with Yoko, reuniting after a year and a half long separation, he is making a comeback in the music world as well. Starting Over. The adolescent love which he so brilliantly and often with such joy and pathos portrayed in his Beatles songs is replaced by mature love, a much more complicated animal than just getting or losing the girl.

Harrison’s farewell album, “Brainwashed,” is surely a minor masterpiece, a work of great depth, self-reflection and bitter emotion. The album has him looking back unflinchingly on his life as he nears the end of his time in the “material world,” a world he never really felt comfortable in and tried all his life to rise above. As his wife, Olivia, writes, about his final days, “Through his distant stare/he could see through something he was reluctant to be/ Tied to this impermanent place.” On “Brainwashed” we get not just his “distant stare,” looking to the Great Beyond, for peace and comfort---we are reminded of what he wrote, “when you see beyond yourself you may find peace of mind there” (“Within You Without You”)--- but also a glare at what he saw as the evils of the material world. Much of the album has to do with life catching up with him, “payment due,” the price he has paid for living in the material world,” to quote another of his songs. One is reminded, with “Brainwashed,” of Sylvia Plath’s final, cathartic set of poems, before her suicide, that reach into the deepest parts of her heart and soul. “Brainwashed” was released in 2000 and George died in 2001, of the cancer(s) he had been fighting for several years.

Harrison’s cynicism runs deep on this album. We had first encountered it in his Beatles song, “Love You Too,” where he warned that the suits “will fill you in with their sins,” corrupt you, if you let them; it was also apparent in another early song of his, “Think For Yourself,” where he roundly rejects “all the good things we could have” if we “just closed our eyes”--remain blind to reality--- a rebuttal of sorts to McCartney’s corn of “close your eyes and I’ll kiss you.” Harrison’s cynicism ripens on “While My Gently Weeps” where he regrets having been “perverted...and inverted” in the pursuit of money and fame. He also directed that cynicism towards those---and here he and Lennon are kindred souls--- who believed the Beatles could save them or the world, once saying they “could hardly save themselves,” a reference to their disintegrating relationships. On his own, Harrison would put out work that

was meaningful to him---and he hoped to others--- saying he would prefer to play to an audience of twenty people who appreciated his music rather than to a crowd of twenty thousand screaming fans.

So, on “Brainwashed” Harrison has “a thing or two” to say about the “villains” of capitalism and the material world, “devils” who will take your soul, even as he was fighting a disease, cancer, that was threatening to take his body. His bitterness is unmistakable. He also confronts his decreasing time on earth, cognizant of his own contributions to his declining health, acknowledging he had ignored signs that he should have heeded. Did not give sufficient attention to the realities of his body and the laws of nature, we might say. Harrison, in the natural spiritual trajectory of his life, turns to God, seeks to be right with Him. He had always had the sense that “so many things we can’t control”---expressed so poignantly in “All Things Must Pass”---and presumably the course of physical disease was one of them. He had prepared himself, spiritually, all his life for death but, to be sure, he does not seem ready and prepared to die on “Brainwashed.”

“Rising Sun” promises rebirth in the warmth of the sun, which is for Harrison a sort of disinfectant for the evils and “contamination” of the material world. He admits with disgust, that he was “near destroyed” by the material world, by the “villains... disguised” as friends, tapping our curiosity as to what he meant by “near destroyed.” He feels old, like he has been through so much in his “short time”---“we only have this short time” in “Behind The Locked Door”--- and that everything he has said or done or thought has been stored and noted and the bill is coming “due.” Karma. Life catching up to him and he knew it. That is the central theme of “Brainwashed.”

His declining physical health looms large in this musical accounting. He had been battling cancer for several years and in “Rising Sun” acknowledges that he was almost a “statistic” in a doctor’s office when he began to pay attention to his health and to the signs his body was giving him, signs he had for too long “ignored,” focused, we might assume, as he was on his spiritual health. Harrison had long had a habit of ignoring signs, not only physical ones but emotional ones as well, in his relationships with women. In “Love You Too,” he asks the love-object to “hang a sign on me” when she wants his attention and in “If I Needed Someone,” he asks her, as a reminder, to “carve your number on my wall. Finally, he is heeding the signs and feels he is moving in the right direction, towards the light and warmth of the sun.

In “Looking For My Life,” Harrison confronts his mortality and the direction his life has taken. Again, life and ignoring his health and the laws of nature has “caught up” with him and he is looking to head off an “emergency.” He

takes responsibility for not heeding the signs, for ignoring his “fears”---“had no idea life was loaded.” Without ignoring his fears he might well not have taken his life in the direction, away from the conventional and well-travelled, he did. He rejected the materialism and narcissism of the culture he was born into. While Harrison wrote, abstractly, about death, in light of his understanding of Eastern religion, of “coming back,” reincarnation, and striving to become a “perfected entity,” he is now facing it as a concrete reality. He said in one of his last interviews that what happens to you after you die is really The Central Issue of Life.

It took “getting down on my knees” for Harrison to understand that he was heading in the wrong direction, that he must change. He needed the help of a power greater than himself. That was the Answer, it had always been the answer for him. He had spent most of his adult life, not always successfully, praying, meditating, trying to “get to” God and to the Light, going back to “Long Long Long,” where he had been searching for God for such a long time and “My Sweet Lord” where he “really want to see You,” Capital Y.” It has been a struggle, a long process, with many setbacks and many times he has found himself “stuck.”

“You’ve no idea what I’ve been through,” he writes in “Looking For My Life.” That line grips us like no other. A very private person, he has been keeping it all to himself, and we feel both sorry for and closer to George. But we want to know specifically what burden has been shouldering alone but it is fair to assume it I his medical condition, cancer. Seems anomalous for a Beatle, an ex-Beatle, who had and did so much to say such a thing but he is letting us into his world in a way he has never doon before. “You’ve no idea what I’ve been through” speaks to most of us.

“Stuck Inside A Cloud” paints a sad picture of his isolation, as he faces a crisis that threatens to consume him. He had always been a self-contained person who, according to his wife, Olivia, suffered from “ life-long feelings of isolation.” We occasionally get a sense of that in his music, for example in “So Sad,” about his divorce from Patti. Harrison was the only Beatle to really confront, in his songs, his sense of aloneness and separateness in the world (Lennon and McCartney always did everything they could to avoid or stave off such confrontation). It appears now George is facing his crisis alone. In “Stuck Inside A Cloud” he is “crying out,” it is a silent cry and no one can “hear” him.. One can’t help but be moved by his vulnerability and sense of aloneness in this song.

“Never Smoked so much” begins the song. He has lost the “will to eat.” Vegetative signs in Depression. Right away we know that George is in trouble, is in pain. He alludes to losing someone he loves but the connection to the vegetative sign

he is experiencing is not clear. There is no evidence that he and his wife, Olivia, were having problems at the time. It is clear, though, with age and ill-health he has “lost his touch,” as we all must, the one out of which such beautiful songs as “Here Comes The Sun” and “Something” came.

The answer is getting back to the Lord, the only way out through the Lord, that is all that matters to him at this trying time, the only thing that can bring him comfort. But the business of getting to God was not so easy, as he often made clear.

As his song “Pisces Fish”---being the symbol to two fish tied together swimming in opposite directions---suggests he has been “living proof of life’s contradictions,” which he now just accepts. It was perhaps inevitably so as he tended to occupy extremes, from highly individualistic to deeply, deeply spiritual. Such an alignment inevitably sets one up for contradictions. Harrison saw life as a battle between dark and the light and between the material world---Darkness and Light. In “Pisces Fish,” he seems to be at a park watching, essentially life go by him, rowers on the lake, birds flying above and he feels like an outside looking in, like he doesn’t fit into any place, group or category. And he has said as much, that he felt like an “alien” when ventures out into the social, feeling most comfortable and at home tending his garden.

Perhaps there is just not enough time to figure it all out, perhaps never enough time, he seems to suggest in “Pisces Fish.” He had always been conscious of time, the passing of time and how much time he had left on earth, going back to his early songs---he “has time,” he doesn’t have time, “pretty soon I’ll be a dead old man,” “we only have this short time.” The answer to the contradictions that beset his personality and life is, again, merging into the oneness of the “ocean of bliss,” Om, the Universal Consciousness, the “little I” merging with the “Big I,” as he once put it. But to do so he would have to give up his individuality which he so valued.

“Devil and the Deep Blue Sea” is a song written by Arlen but one that Harrison liked. Again, the theme of being “stuck” between two poles, as in the songs discussed above.

For life to have meaning and purpose one must know where he is going and that is what Harrison is trying to express in “Any Road.” And that destination is presumably God---“Bow to God,” he writes in that song--- and the after-life of accountability. He once said that Hinduism, to which he had devoted himself, provided him with a “road-map” to life. He has “paid the price”---another expression of life catching up to him on “Brainwashed”---for “living in the material world” and he needs to find a way to rise above it. It has been a struggle, for him, between the “dark and the light.” Harrison again, in “Any Road,” acknowledges that he--- and his life--- has been a “bundle of contradictions,” obviously a

source of frustration to him and probably why he too often finds himself “stuck.”

It is perhaps not a coincidence that his song, “Blue Jay Way, appears on the Magical Mystery album. McCartney had conceived of that project as the four riding a bus into the country, to nowhere in particular, filming whatever caught their attention along the way. In “Blue Jay Way,” Harrison urges his “friends” who have gotten lost on their way to visit him to ask for directions. Similarly, “Any Road” is a belated retort to McCartney’s “Magical Myster Tour:” While McCartney was content to “get lost” on this bus-ride into the country Harrison is saying, in “Any Road,” one must know

where one is going and that sometimes means asking for direction. That’s why he turned to Hinduism.

Finally, “Brainwashed” has George, in an uncharacteristic outburst of anger, lashing out at the indoctrinating agents of society and government who seek to “fill you in with their sins,” as he put it in “Love You Too, to impose their beliefs on you. Thinking for yourself--and individual responsibility--was at the heart of his personal philosophy. His songs, “Think For Yourself,” and “Brainwashed” bookend his life and career. We knew that he was protective of his boundaries, a very private person, but we didn’t know the extent of the anger he felt towards those who tried to impose their beliefs on you.