

Hearing Lennon's secret messages

John Ashton

A psychologist and Liverpudlian gives his interpretation of the New York murder

Rocky Raccoon checked into his room
Only to find Gideon's bible
Rocky had come equipped with a gun
To shoot off the legs of his rival
His rival it seems had broken his dreams
By stealing the girl of his fancy. . . .
Rocky burst in and grinning a grin
He said Danny boy this is a showdown
—"Rocky Raccoon" by Lennon/McCartney, from the Beatles' *White Album*.

Everybody seems to have known John Lennon. The curious thing about this is that thousands of people genuinely believe that they did, and millions of people believe that, in a way, they did. This aspect of his powerful and charismatic personality may well have led to his murder, through mechanisms which bear examination for their widespread implications.

I never knew John Lennon, although he lived around the corner, and we both went to Quarry Bank school in Liverpool. However, my brother, who was a similar age to Lennon and claims to have received a black eye from him, knew him in the pre-teen period of gangs and girl-baiting in and around Woolton, and he has the rare pleasure of memories which precede the confusing effects of fame.

It is clear from these accounts that from the beginning Lennon had that rare combination of creative intelligence, leadership, deviance and nous which usually led to somebody else getting the blame for his elaborate practical jokes. This Huckleberry Finn quality was demonstrated on one occasion in Bioletti's—the barber's in Penny Lane—which was run by an expatriate Italian family.

It was rumoured that old man Bioletti had been involved in the battles over Italian statehood in the Garibaldi period, and his shaky hands with the scissors made him a figure of fear to the local lads. (His rule was that boys could have their hair cut only when there were no men waiting.)

John Lennon was already behind two other boys in the queue, when some men came in. Exasperated, he told the other two lads: "Do you know: last week, old man Bioletti cut off somebody's scalp—completely—you could see the brains. But it was all right, he stuck it on again with sticking plaster." The two boys left.

This taste for devilment, and occasionally bizarre imagery, should perhaps be remembered in the light of the manner of his death. The Likely Lad image had an edge to it, which could be misconstrued by the really disturbed—by the psychotic.

From an early stage, John drew freely on his personal experience and observation in writing his songs. Apart from *Penny Lane* and *Eleanor Rigby* (which was based on a spinster in the local church choir), there was *Strawberry Fields*, which was a gothic semi-magical mansion within spitting distance of Vale Road, where he lived. *Strawberry Fields* was a Salvation Army orphanage in sprawling grounds, full of rabbits, where you could be lost in the jungle of undergrowth and trees. For those of us who knew the place, the power and immediacy of referring to it in a song confirmed our identification with the total phenomenon of the Beatles—music, words and lifestyle.

In retrospect, it seems that this aspect of the Beatles phenomenon—where shared consciousness, ideas and experiences appeared to be incorporated in the words and music—developed about this time. As the group evolved through drugs and meditation, they became the focus for a euphoric state of immediacy, which has now been forgotten by a lot of people, but which engulfed a whole generation around the world.

A shared consciousness

We hung on every word, pounced on every song, bought albums on the day they came out, and listened carefully and endlessly for secret messages such as those on the end of *Strawberry Fields*, *Sergeant Pepper* and the *White Album*. A whole global generation was united in a sub-culture, with its own newspapers, lifestyle and music—truly the alternative society even if it was built on the quicksands of commercialism.

Through the summer of 1967 and into 1968, it seemed that half the youth of the world was in Haight-Ashbury or Katmandu. Everybody seemed to be finely tuned to all those events in a mass movement partly held together by a collective sense of paranoia related to drugs and "the fuzz," but which was able to focus clearly on peace in Vietnam as the central issue of the day. The euphoria and self-confidence appeared to promise to sweep away the existing order, and replace it by one whose agenda was somehow encompassed by *Oz*, *International Times*, and *Village Voice*.

I think we have treated this phenomenon too lightly in the ensuing grey years of the late 1970s—perhaps because we are ignorant of the great mass forces which ebb and flow in times of social change. Certainly it is possible to consider the events of those few heady years as a form of collective

weakening of the boundaries of self for large numbers of young people. This opened them (us) up to powerful psychological influences, which have spilled over into the Manson family, Jim Jones in Guyana and the Moonies, and which have swept away cultural and moral norms. These new forms of social organisation were, and are, a reality.

It is not clear what has happened to the majority of the generation directly involved in the late sixties. They have probably been living out whatever lifestyles finally evolved, and raising children. Perhaps this generation is dormant. Perhaps, like John Lennon and Bob Dylan in the recent past, it will soon be ready to go back on the road, and exercise the influence which comes from experience. Perhaps the energy has been dissipated as a very consequence of its lifestyles.

However, for some people on the fringes of madness or actually in its grip, the phenomena of weakened social constraints, and confusion over the ego-boundaries of others, can lead to the acting-out of psychotic delusions on the rest of society, or on specific individuals who have in a sense placed themselves in a vulnerable position as char-

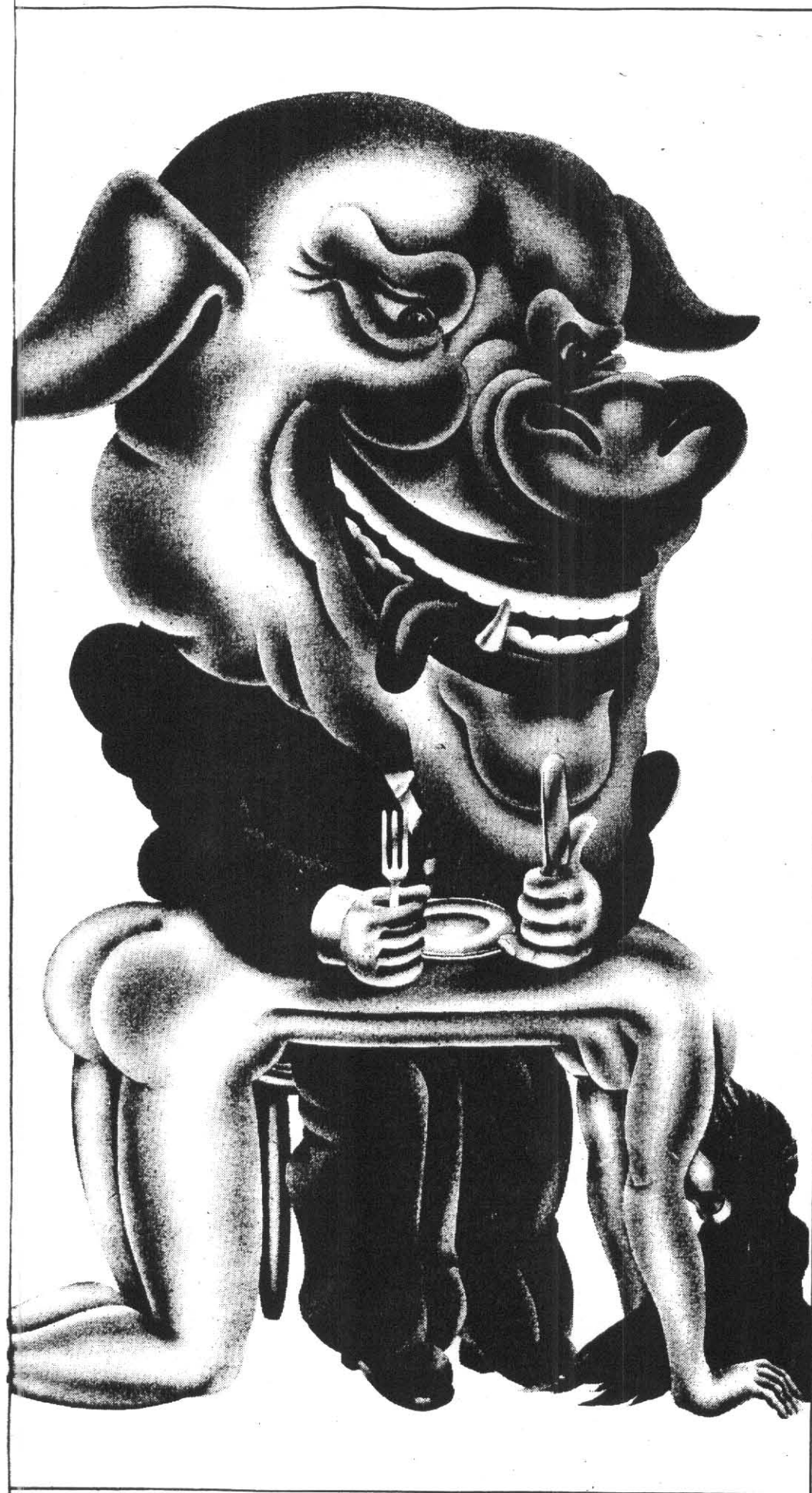


Two of Alan Aldridge's illustrations to Beatle songs: "Getting better" (right) and "There's a place" (above)

ismatic leaders. In the 1930s, Germany gave us Hitler, and in the present era the United States has supplied a succession of people, including Charles Manson and now Mark David Chapman.

One question, which should perhaps concern us, is whether the sixties were a transient phenomenon, or whether we can regard them as a trailer for the future. If California really is the future—a sort of perpetual sixties, based on leisure and individual self-realisation, and where there is an amazing tolerance of deviant behaviour—we may not have as long as we think to prepare for it.

The Manson family consisted of a menage of young girls and wayward youths and men, some criminal and some initially not. Many were from broken homes, and without a secure base from which to move into the adult world. They were very vulnerable. Under the influence of the charismatic, powerful and paranoid Charles Manson, most of them came to share his delusional interpretation of the world, and in par-



ticular his interpretation of the development of black/white relations.

Manson believed that, at a given sign, the blacks would rise up, kill a few million whites, and take over the government. Then, when they discovered themselves to be unfit to run the world, they would turn over the government to Him, Manson. It was the "Pig Christian Wealthy Americans" that would be killed and "Christ/The Devil" would pull off the second coming.

At this exact point, the Beatles' *White Album* was released. The album was immediately assumed by Manson to contain elaborate instructions.

Psychiatrists would regard the assumption that "Sexy Sadie, you came along to turn everybody on" was a message about Sadie Mae Glutz (one of the Manson family) to be a paranoid idea of reference. To Manson and those under his influence, it was proof that the album had been produced specially for him as a signal. The chorus of *Blackbird*—"You were only waiting for this moment to arise" signified that the time had come for the blacks to rise up. The words of *Piggies* were the inspiration to seek out and murder Sharon Tate, and the other victims, in a bizarre and ritualistic fashion—a task which had the code name Helter Skelter.

The Beatles were appalled, but fantasy and psychoticism had overtaken the reality and the makebelieve. With the murder of John, his statement that the Beatles were more famous than Jesus Christ and the line from the *Ballad of John and Yoko* that "the way things are going they are going to crucify me" now ring a retrospective note of awful prediction of a role being played out. A role which a madman had taken note of.

The initial information on the killer would seem to imply that he, like Manson, is suffering from a paranoid psychosis; that ideas from the real world are taken in and interpreted in a delusional, insane way, as if they were intended to be about him, leading him to act on them.

For a person to believe that he is somebody else—usually somebody very well-known, like Jesus Christ—is not unusual in schizophrenia. Chapman seems to have taken on the mantle of John Lennon's entire personality, to the extent of marrying his own Yoko Ono—a Japanese woman. We will no doubt, in due course, hear the details of the bizarre logic which led him to destroy one of the greatest popular talents ever.

But before dismissing this happening as just another aberration by a mad man in a mad country, acting against somebody belonging to the fringe world of entertainment, perhaps we should consider the power of counter-cultures, and the way in which ideas, beliefs and motivations are spread from one person to another. Perhaps we should address ourselves to our ignorance of the psychological and social forces which can be unleashed as we approach the millennium, at a time of unprecedented social change.

Is there really any difference between the assassination of a John Kennedy or a John Lennon or a John Paul II?