

# “Imagine”—John Lennon (1971)

Added to the National Registry: 2023

Essay by Kenneth Womack (guest post)\*



*John Lennon*

Over the years, John Lennon’s “Imagine” has been heralded by critics and fans alike as the former Beatle’s consensus masterpiece, the song that--like Paul McCartney’s “Maybe I’m Amazed” or George Harrison’s “My Sweet Lord”--towers over the rest of his solo achievements.

But for Lennon, “Imagine” stands high above the breadth of all of the other ex-Beatles’ accomplishments, rightfully earning its place at the top of the rock pantheon as the genre’s most influential anti-war song. More than 50 years later, “Imagine” has weathered the decades, proving itself to be a composition for the ages that extols the enduring value of hope and community from one generation to the next.

Drawn in part from wife Yoko Ono’s “Cloud Piece” instructions, Lennon’s “Imagine” enjoys a vaunted place among such classic peace anthems as Bob Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind,” the Byrds’ “Turn! Turn! Turn! (To Everything There Is a Season),” and Lennon’s own “Give Peace a Chance.” Lennon drew his original inspiration from Ono’s “Grapefruit” (1964), a collection of “event scores” and instructions for living creatively. In “Cloud Piece,” Lennon’s principal inspiration, Ono writes, “Imagine the clouds dripping, dig a hole in your garden to put them in.” For this reason, Lennon observed during one of his last interviews that Ono should be identified as his coauthor, remarking to David Sheff that “Imagine” “should be credited as a Lennon/Ono song. A lot of it--the lyric and the concept--came from Yoko, but in those days, I was a bit more selfish, a bit more macho, and I sort of omitted her contribution, but it was right out of ‘Grapefruit.’”

Lennon also cited a Christian prayer book as part of the song’s impetus. In June 1969, he had been gifted the book from comedian and civil rights activist Dick Gregory. As Lennon later explained to Sheff, the book afforded him with the key concept about the nature of “positive prayer” that would inform the composition of “Imagine.” “If you can *imagine* a world at peace, with no denominations of religion--not without religion, but without this ‘my God-is-bigger-than-your-God’ thing--then it can be true.”

As for the song’s musical structure, Lennon had originally composed the familiar cadence for “Imagine” during the Beatles’ January 1969 “Get Back” sessions, completing the composition in

1971 on a Steinway piano in the master bedroom of his Tittenhurst Park estate in Ascot. With the song's lyrics and music in place, Lennon began recording the song at his home studio in May 1971, with accompaniment from Klaus Voormann on bass and Alan White on drums. That July, working from a score by Torrie Zito at New York City's Record Plant, the Flux Fiddlers overdubbed a string arrangement.

Originally released in September 1971 as the lead track on Lennon's "Imagine" album, the composition notched a number-three hit on the US "Billboard" Hot 100 chart. It would eventually register a number-one hit in his homeland in the wake of his December 1980 assassination. But when it comes to a composition of this nature and influence, record industry statistics tell only a small part of the story. Since 1971, "Imagine" has emerged as the most recognized peace anthem in the world, regularly showcased on global simulcasts, monuments, and memorials as Lennon's succinct vision for an everlasting peace.

But, at the same time, "Imagine" has become a hot-button political issue, lauded by some as a song of reconciliation, while others deride it as having anti-religious, anti-government overtones. In his own way, Lennon anticipated the naysayers--although it is truly difficult to imagine even as prescient a thinker as John Lennon predicting the incredible rancor and dehumanizing tenor of our current political discourse. Back in 1971, he implicitly understood that sharing his dream for engendering world peace required delivering his message with "a little honey," as he remarked at the time. Hence, his lyrics extol the listener to "imagine" a world in which we are no longer constrained by our hard-wired, hardline views on religion and nationhood--the very subjects that have led to untold human suffering and calamity across the long history of humankind.

In the ensuing years, both Lennon and Ono have reflected upon the song's clear, simple message. "Imagine," which says, "Imagine that there was no more religion, no more country, no more politics," is virtually "The Communist Manifesto," Lennon later remarked, "even though I'm not particularly a Communist, and I do not belong to any movement." Commenting 30 years after her husband's senseless murder, Ono pointed out that "Imagine" was the limpid core of John's belief system--"that we are all one country, one world, one people."

Writing in "Music and Musicians" back in 1972, pioneering Beatles author Wilfrid Mellers described "Imagine" as being the seamless product of "an introverted, brooding piano texture" coupled with a "folk-like vocal line [that] flowers and proliferates." And this latter aspect, in essence, is what Lennon set precisely out to do and may yet accomplish: to draw listeners into a world of potentiality in which we might achieve a lasting peace. In this simple paean to global unity and fellowship, Lennon had the courage, incredible as that may seem both then and especially now, to imagine new possibilities for living in a better, and as of yet unrealized world.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.