

John Lennon

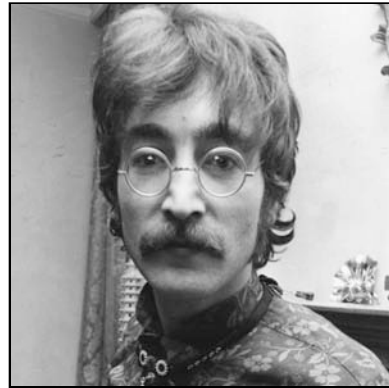
1940–1980



WHY HE MADE HISTORY John Lennon was a member of the Beatles, one of the most popular rock groups of the 1960s, and became a vocal antiwar activist.



As you read the biography below, consider how John Lennon's life reflected the times in which he lived. How was his life influenced by the changes in the world around him?



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John Lennon was born in Liverpool, England, in 1940.

While he was in high school, Lennon met another teen named Paul McCartney who shared his love of American rhythm and blues music. Lennon and McCartney played together in a band and later, with the addition of guitarist George Harrison and drummer Ringo Starr, became known as the Beatles.

In 1963, the Beatles released their first single, “Love Me Do,” in England. Theirs was a new sound that mixed rock and roll with rhythm and blues. In an era when trios and quartets crooned soft melodies, Lennon screamed and shouted in “I Want to Hold Your Hand.”

The January 1964 release of the album *Meet the Beatles* in the United States brought instant fame. Approximately 73 million people watched the band's performance on the *Ed Sullivan Show* the next month. By March 1964, the Beatles held the top five spots on the *Billboard* singles chart.

The Beatles' music brought not only a new sound but a new sensibility. They sang about love and loss, but also questioned materialism in “Can't Buy Me Love,” and wrote of empty lives in “Eleanor Rigby” and “Nowhere Man.” With each successive album, the songs written by Lennon and McCartney music incorporated more influences and sounds. Even mind-altering drugs were reflected in songs such as “Yellow Submarine” and “Strawberry Fields Forever.”

The Beatles became leaders in the 1960s counterculture. Albums like *Rubber Soul* (1965) and *Revolver* (1966) opened up for teenagers a world of possibilities beyond the cultural confines of the society in which they had been raised. The single “All You Need Is Love” was embraced an anthem for the summer of love.

Lennon, the band's lead singer and its most vocal member, spoke freely on social and political issues. He infuriated many when he claimed the Beatles were “more popular than Jesus.” He openly opposed the war in

A Time of Social Change

Biography

Vietnam, both in concerts and in interviews, which led to more criticism of him and the band.

In 1968 Lennon met Yoko Ono, an artist and performer from Japan. The two quickly became inseparable. Lennon divorced his first wife (with whom he had a son) and married Ono in 1969. With Ono, Lennon became more politically active. The pair staged events to protest the Vietnam War. They called their honeymoon a “bed-in for peace” and spent it in bed in front of TV cameras talking to reporters about the horrors of war. During the honeymoon, Lennon wrote the antiwar anthem “Give Peace a Chance.”

After the Beatles broke up as a band in 1970, Lennon and Ono moved to New York, where he joined other antiwar leaders to mobilize young people against the Vietnam War. In September 1971 Lennon released a solo album, *Imagine*, whose melodic title track urged listeners to “Imagine there’s no countries/ . . . Nothing to kill or die for.” Lennon’s increasingly vocal criticism of the Vietnam War and his plans to protest at the 1972 Republican National Convention attracted the attention of the Nixon administration, which tried to deport him.

Lennon fought the government in the courts for years, a battle that was financially and emotionally draining. For a time Lennon turned away from music, dedicating himself to raising his second son, Sean.

Lennon returned to the recording studio in 1980. One night as he was returning home, a deranged fan approached him outside his New York apartment building. The man shot Lennon in the back, killing him.

Millions of fans still gather to observe a day of remembrance and sing the song “Imagine” every year on the anniversary of Lennon’s death. In New York City, a section of Central Park that had been one of Lennon’s favorites was renovated and named Strawberry Fields in his honor. More than 100 countries have recognized Strawberry Fields as a garden of peace.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. **Recall** What song by John Lennon became an antiwar anthem?

2. **Evaluate** Do you think musicians should or should not use their music to promote their political views? Why?

ACTIVITY

Use music by John Lennon and/or the Beatles to create a musical presentation that reflects events of the 1960s and/or 1970s. Add narration to explain the importance of the songs or lyrics you select. Share your presentation with the class.