

## Letter to Lennon; musings for a manufactured martyr

Maurice Jamall

It was an unusually warm Saturday afternoon and I was at Steven Harvey's house. I sat down at the baby grand and he put on *that* record. I had been appointed the task of working out the chords for 'the song'. We were to play it at the school's inter-House music competition the following month which was also to be our band's first live performance<sup>1</sup>. It was the summer of '79, a summer of so many firsts. I was 15 years old.

Almost apologetically, the first few bars seeped out from the speakers. How tiresome, how predictable: C followed by Cmaj7 and then, wait for it ... F! 'The song' limped along without so much as a single imaginative chord progression to pique my interest and as the singer droned on and on in that signature nasal delivery of his, I slipped deeper and deeper into a mirthless torpor. It took just two or three listenings to transcribe 'the song's' entire chord sequence and a little under an hour to learn to play it proficiently. John Lennon's *Imagine* has to be one of the most over-rated compositions of the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Yet, while in my teens it was the pedestrian nature of the music that ruffled my feathers, as I have grown older, I have been struck, indeed am continually struck each time I hear 'that song' by the words and the simplistic, shallow and frankly naive sentiments they convey. Far from being a modern-day canticle, a clarion call for a better, more perfect world, subject the lyrics to just a modicum of critical analysis and the whole piece starts to come apart in your hands. So, first things first: here then, are the words to *Imagine*. Do you agree with me? Perhaps not yet but I hope that by the time you have finished reading this paper, you may have come round to my way of thinking.

### *Imagine*

Imagine there's no heaven

It's easy if you try

No hell below us

Above us only sky

Imagine all the people living for today

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<sup>1</sup> Contrary to popular belief, the house system in English schools pre-dates the *Harry Potter* series by some four hundred years. Incidentally, Raymond Chandler named his hero, 'Phillip Marlowe', after his house while a pupil at Dulwich College.

Imagine there's no countries  
It isn't hard to do  
Nothing to kill or die for  
And no religion too  
Imagine all the people living life in peace

You, you may say  
I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one  
I hope some day you'll join us  
And the world will be as one

Imagine no possessions  
I wonder if you can  
No need for greed or hunger  
A brotherhood of man  
Imagine all the people sharing all the world

You, you may say  
I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one  
I hope some day you'll join us  
And the world will live as one

If *Imagine* is such a mediocre composition, this begs the question, two questions, come to think of it: What peculiar set of circumstances have come together to bestow on it so revered-a-place in our (pop) cultural heritage? How has a composition such as this managed to pass into folklore as an anthem for a generation, even for generations yet to come? The answer I think is that the Lennon myth has been carefully constructed and perpetuated, reinforced since his murder and this has been carried out with such finesse that many consider him to be a martyr of sorts. But when pressed to answer the question, 'a martyr to what?' few can come up with a coherent, considered response. The simple truth of the matter is that his death, while tragic, was just a case of bad luck. He died neither for his political beliefs nor for his anti-Vietnam war stance. He was shot by a mentally unstable fan and that is something which could happen to any celebrity.

Myths, if allowed to go unchallenged for long enough, have an annoying tendency to morph into defacto fact and enter the national or even international *schema* thereafter to be accorded 'common knowledge' or worse, 'received wisdom', status. This of course is nothing new; it has been going on for centuries. Here, for

instance, are two of my favourite myths from English history:

### ● **Richard III: A Tyrant's Tyrant?**

When you think of this king, what images and traits come to mind? The hunchback?; the cruel, megalomaniac monarch?; the cold-blooded murderer of his two nephews, a.k.a. the Princes in the Tower? In actual fact, there is barely a scrap of evidence to support this picture of Richard III<sup>2</sup>. By all contemporary accounts, Richard was not an unattractive chap and he was certainly no hunchback, neither was he despised by the people. On the contrary, Richard was rather progressive as monarchs of that era go; in his mere two-year reign and among many other accomplishments, he was responsible for the introduction of the bail system which is still in use to this day, he standardized weights and measures throughout the land and made English the language of the law so that common people could understand what was going on, what they were being charged with and accused of (hardly the acts of a tyrant). And as for his killing the princes, cases perhaps more compelling can be made against Henry, Duke of Buckingham and King Henry VII. It is largely thanks to William Shakespeare, writing during the reign of Elizabeth Tudor (granddaughter of the aforementioned suspect, Henry VII), that the blacker than black image of Richard III emerged and has since passed into today's national *schema*. Clearly, Billy the Bard knew upon which side his bread was buttered.

### ● **The Battle of Agincourt: David, Meet Goliath**

*"We few, we happy few. We band of brothers ..."* Yes, it's that Shakespeare fellow again. Conventional wisdom has it that King Henry V with no more than a few hundred archers (and right on his side) against immeasurable odds took on and then out the might of the French war machine at Agincourt on Saint Crispin's Day in 1415. English audaciousness, laughter in the face of adversity, *"Cry God for Harry, England and St. George!"* Not quite the whole story, as it goes<sup>3</sup>. What actually happened was that the battlefield was sodden and the French knights, while no doubt looking terribly chic in their shiny, but oh-so-heavy and cumbersome armour, were bogged down in that tiny field and were unable to put up much of a fight. When they surrendered they had expected to be treated with a courtesy befitting their rank and eventually ransomed (this was customary); the French put up little resistance until it was too late and the English were shooting proverbial *poisson* in a barrel. What the English carried out that St. Crispin's Day was nothing less than a ruthless act of unbridled carnage—some have even called it a war crime—an act devoid of any semblance of honour. Yet, thanks to the perpetuation of the preferred narrative, the lasting image that the English have of that day, to this day, is one which is romanticized and wrong.

<sup>2</sup> Take a look at these good people: <http://www.richardiii.net/>. The Richard III Society are on a mission to return the slandered monarch to his rightful place in history. You could also read Carson (2009).

<sup>3</sup> See: Curry (2006)

*“And gentlemen in England now-a-bed  
Shall think themselves accurs’d they were not here,  
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks  
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin’s day.”<sup>4</sup>*

And let’s be frank: what Englishman wouldn’t rather this be the way it was? But, as the late Carl Sagan, (1994: 204) famously declared, *“Better the hard truth, I say, than the comforting fantasy.”<sup>5</sup>*

So Richard III was a rotten king, Agincourt was one of England’s finest hours and John Lennon’s *Imagine* is a wonderful song. This ‘received wisdom’ then, is part of our nation’s collective schema, but how exactly does schema work? Before moving on to an analysis of ‘that song’, I’d like to take a slight detour to discuss, in broad strokes, what schema is.

## Schema Theory: In a Nutshell

Read the sentence (from McCarthy, 1991:87) and answer the questions that follow:

*Peter was on his way to school.*

- How old is Peter?
- What is he wearing?
- How is he going to school?

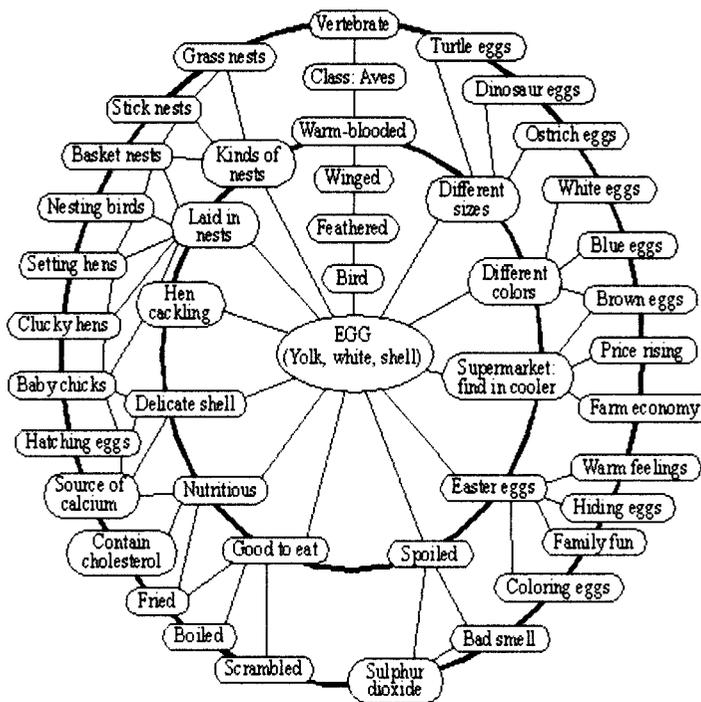
Depending on your pre-knowledge, your schema, you may have decided that Peter is about eight or nine. He is wearing a school uniform and he is walking along the road. Alternatively, you might be thinking that he is in his early teens, dressed in jeans and a shirt and perhaps riding a bicycle, the bus or the train. I think it highly unlikely that you entertained the possibility that Peter is travelling by boat or gondola since that is not part of your schema related to ‘ways to get to school’.

According to (among others) the educational psychologist R.C. Anderson, schema is a cognitive framework which helps us to organize and interpret information drawing from our knowledge of the world

<sup>4</sup> Henry V, Act 4, Scene 3. By the way, the English numbered 9,000 to the French’s 12,000 according to recent research. Outnumbered? Certainly. But a mere *‘happy few’*? That’s a bit of a stretch, wouldn’t you agree?

<sup>5</sup> By the way, a local myth I have always found interesting concerns the manner in which Chiyonofuji’s career came to an end. Most people think he retired after being defeated by Takanohana. Not true. He lost to Takanohana on the first day of the tournament but retired after losing to Takatoriki on the third day.

(including linguistic knowledge) located in our long-term memory. The use of schema crucially allows us to take shortcuts by making generalizations when trying to make sense of the world about us. Take for example a tree. You look at a tree and know immediately that it's a tree. Imagine (no I haven't forgotten the prime directive of this paper; bear with me just a tad longer) if you had to study every leaf, every twig and branch before reaching the conclusion that what you are looking at is in fact a tree and have to do that each and every time. Now you know what a goldfish goes through every 30 seconds of its hapless existence. Our knowledge is not in discreet packages rather it is linked making networks of inter-related meanings. (Remember '*Peter was on his way to school*'? How many ideas, 'things' did that simple sentence provoke / invoke?) Take for instance this example of the schema that an individual may have for the word, 'egg'. It might look something like this:



(taken from Davis, 1991)

However, one major drawback with schema is that the mental frameworks we have in place might encourage us to stereotype and perhaps even resist or discard pertinent information that runs counter to our current way of understanding the world. While on the whole, we tend to add to, update and modify our schema based on new experiences, new information there are times when we simply don't, won't or can't. Case in point: getting to school by boat. I rather doubt that this new information will become part of your long-term 'ways of getting to school' schema. It is simply unnecessary to your day-to-day life.

Let's have another look at schema in a slightly more entertaining manner. Read the poem that follows.  
Does it ring any bells?

*I am Spartacus*

Father, could you help an old altar boy?

Are you trying to seduce me?

Would you like me to seduce you?

If she can stand it, so can I

I'm ready for my close-up

Blow the bloody doors off!

Did you hear what I said, Miss. Kubelik?

Plastics?

Zuzu's petals! There they are!

Shut up and deal

You can't handle the truth

The vessel with the pestle has the brew which is true

To die would be an awfully big adventure

Help me Clarence, I want to live!

I am Spartacus

Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera

*(I am Spartacus, Jamall, 2011)*

While we all possess our own unique schema, certain aspects of our schema, our knowledge and understanding of the world, overlap with that of others (and thank goodness for that!). If you are a bit of a movie buff, you have no doubt already identified most of the films from which these words were lifted<sup>6</sup>. If you are not a film buff or a fan of cinema perhaps by bringing your knowledge of the world to the words before you, you have constructed plausible scenarios, contexts within which the various exchanges are taking place. Indeed, one cannot but help try to make sense out of seemingly random pieces of data.

I am going to go out on a bit of a limb here. However, since I am writing this with reference to my own

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<sup>6</sup> They are, in order of appearance: *The Exorcist*; *The Graduate*; *Casablanca*; *Sunset Boulevard*; *The Italian Job*; *The Apartment*; *It's a Wonderful Life*; *A Few Good Men*; *The Court Jester*; *Peter Pan*; *Spartacus*; *The King and I*

schema, it's a pretty sturdy limb, methinks. Here's what I am thinking you, dear reader, are thinking. Wrong? Right? Neither. I am merely constructing a meaning based on my understanding of the world, my schema.

#### Verse One, Scenario A

I suspect that the film buff, familiar with the contexts from which the lines were lifted, will be enjoying the new sense (as opposed to nonsense) that has been constructed and laughing at the absurdity that, when those profoundly divorced contexts are smashed together, a fresh narrative can nevertheless be constructed. I have no idea what yours is and there isn't enough space in this paper to tell you mine.

#### Verse One, Scenario B

If these lines are not part of your schema, you can't have failed to construct some sort of meaning, some sort of context for the words you have read. For this I apologise. It can only have been a rather unpretty picture. I will not insult m' reader's intelligence with any further, frivolous discussion.

#### Verse Three, Scenario A

See: Verse One, Scenario A

#### Verse Three, Scenario B

This is a hard one so I'll just tell you what my schema dictates if I assume no prior knowledge of where these lines came from. I see a group of gangsters around a table, cigar-chomping tough guys with nothing to lose, least of all money. One guy gets a bit sentimental over some petals. He doesn't deal the cards. His pals don't care. They just want to gamble, get on with the game. The bull elephant at the table barks the words in the second line of the verse. Heartless. Cold. Pitiless. What a complete berk!<sup>7</sup>

Forgive your author this small indulgence but, '*Shut up and deal*' is one of my favourite closing lines of any film I've seen. The reality is anything but akin to the harsh, cigar-chomping gangster barking orders at an underling. In fact, it is the last line of the film, '*The Apartment*', starring Jack Lemmon and Shirley MacLaine. Could anyone but Billy Wilder have written a happier, a more heartwarming ending? The Lemmon character (C.C. Baxter), while the two of them are playing cards, finally throws all caution to the wind and proclaims his love for Miss. Kubelik (Shirley MacLaine). '*I love you Miss. Kubelick*', he says. (Imagine that! Proclaiming one's love for another and yet remaining so carefully polite, purely in order to allow the lady the easiest of possible outs, should she choose to decline the ... invitation). To this, MacLaine turns her head towards Lemmon, her swimming-pool eyes rest gently upon him, a butter-wouldn't-melt look

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<sup>7</sup> Not a lot of people know this, but the word 'berk' originates from Cockney rhyming slang and is actually very rude since it is an abbreviation of 'The Berkley Hunt'. Apples and pears: stairs; Frog and toad: road; The Berkley Hunt:

on her face and in the most compassionate and tender yet minxish tone she says ... *'Shut up and deal'*.

Now coming back to schema, for those of you reading this who have seen and liked the film, no further words are necessary; you know I could have written another hundred words or more to describe that last scene. For those of you reading this who have not seen the film and enjoy romantic comedies: I am pretty sure that I have piqued your schema enough for you to want to go and borrow this film the next time you visit your local DVD store. To the rest of you, my apologies; you must have found that quite embarrassing.

I shall leave any further discussion of *'I am Spartacus'* here; I think I've made my point. Why not read the poem again now? Why not go and see where your schema coupled with your imagination takes you?

And so I now return to John Lennon and 'that song'. Lennon is without a doubt one of England's heroes. In the schema of things he is considered to be all of the following:

- a really nice guy
- a great musician
- a voice of a generation
- a Beatle
- a loving husband
- a loving father
- a victim of heartless parents
- an advocate for peace
- an advocate for equality

The above qualities make up the image of Lennon; it is part and parcel of the way we see, perhaps want to see, this man. Do you recall how our schema at times prefers to reject new information, new data that requires us to reconsider our worldview. I pose the following question now: Which of the facts below are you already aware of but have pushed to the back of your mind?

- Lennon was married to Cynthia before Yoko.
- He was quite a violent husband.
- He had a son with Cynthia, Julian.
- He ignored his son, had next to no contact with him between 1967 and 1980.
- He was a heroin addict for some years.
- He enjoyed women; indeed Yoko, Mrs. Lennon, would even take to vetting and selecting his girlfriends on occasion.

The interesting thing is that the above truths have been very carefully repressed, have been drowned out by the constant chant that John Lennon was, well, how he is perceived in the nation's, the world's schema. Don't get me wrong here, I am making no moral judgment, *'Whatever gets you thru the night'* if I may quote the man himself. *'Live and let live,'* is my motto, probably yours, too. What I find fascinating is the *why* of it all! Why must we all agree that this lad from Liverpool exemplified qualities that he clearly did not live by? How can a man speak of 'love' and yet abandon his own son, refuse to have any contact with his own flesh and blood? How can a millionaire retain his millions and yet speak of injustice, of not sharing what we have with those who need? More importantly, how is it that *we* happily overlook these gargantuan failings? Put it this way: If John Lennon had been your brother or a close friend, what would you have said to him?

*a. I think it's marvellous that you have decided to have nothing to do with Julian.*

*b. For fuck's sakes, you stupid bastard! Pick up the phone and call your son!!!!*

Have I made you think? I hope so. And now I'd like to see what you think about 'that song'. If only Lennon were alive or if only I could travel back in time so that I could write to him and tell him what I think of 'that song'. Obviously, that is not possible but if it were possible, it would read something like this:

Tokyo, T166-0013  
Suginami-ku  
Horinouchi, 1-14-22

Dakota Building  
1 West 72<sup>nd</sup> Street  
New York  
NY

Dec. 10<sup>th</sup>, 2011

Dear Mr Lennon,

I am writing to you about 'that song'. While most people seem to think it's a work for the ages, your imaginings left me feeling exasperated. I really don't think you've thought your ideas through frankly, because all of the things you ask us to imagine are already to be found in this world. And they combine to create a most unpretty picture, Mr. Lennon. Let me explain:

*Imagine there's no Heaven*

*It's easy if you try*

*No Hell below us*

*Above us only sky*

In a tiny, dank room on a rotting mattress in Manila, there's a 14-year-old girl. She leaves this room for only an hour a day in order to wash, eat and go to the toilet. The rest of the time she lies in an inhuman, degrading squalor and waits. She waits-in fear and terror, no doubt-for the men to come. They force themselves on her. They fuck her any way they like. Dozens of men, every day. She doesn't need to imagine there's no heaven; she knows that God has abandoned her. She doesn't need to imagine there's no Hell, for she's already living in Hell. And there are hundreds of thousands of girls and boys just like her all over the world<sup>8</sup>. Has it ever crossed your mind that millions of people in this world are living lives of unimaginable suffering, Mr. Lennon?

Imagine that.

*Imagine all the people*

*Living for today*

What you don't seem to get, Mr. Lennon, is that far too many people already *are* living only for today. The rampant consumption particularly in the First World is killing this planet. If Earth were a person, it would be on a life-support system in the intensive care unit of a hospital. Nevertheless, too many of us continue to live for today, letting our short-term wants spread as surely as a cancer throughout our only home. Where do we go when Mother Earth dies? Nowhere. We die too. All of us. People who live only for today know full well that their selfishness will lead to global calamity. Their thinking? "I'll be dead long before the proverbial hits the fan. It's the future's problem, not mine". But yes, we would all *like* to live for today. Skip work and go to the park and have a few beers with friends. But there are realities such as income and pensions for those of us who are not millionaires. There is also the moral imperative, duty to, and responsibility for the well-being of others. How on earth can you desire us all to live for today? To do so would create not an harmonious society but an anarchical one.

*Imagine there's no countries*

*It isn't hard to do*

*Nothing to kill or die for*

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<sup>8</sup> Due to the heinous nature of this crime, exact figures are hard to come by but according to UNICEF the actual number of children involved in the sex trade numbers between one and seven million.

*And no religion too*

*Imagine all the people*

*Living life in peace*

You are a British citizen, Mr. Lennon. You have the right to live in the UK. You have the right to leave the UK and also to return there any time you want.<sup>9</sup> It's *your* country. You are protected by its laws, you are protected by its government and its armed forces. If you were kidnapped and held by a foreign power, Her Majesty's Government might even go to war over you as it once did for another British citizen and for no more than his severed ear at that<sup>10</sup>. Makes you feel safe inside, doesn't it? On reflection, it's nice to have a country, isn't it? However, there are people all over the world—refugees—who have no country but I imagine they would dearly love one. They are stateless and therefore powerless, at the mercy of those in whose lands they eek out lives of heartbreaking desperation. Would you like to trade places with the stateless? How about being a Palestinian for a while? Interested, Mr. Lennon? Would you like to live in the dire refugee camps of Pakistan, Jordan, or Syria? Probably not. I've no doubt that you can imagine the kind of life it would mean for you, your wife and son if you had no country.

*Imagine no possessions*

*I wonder if you can*

I watched the touching video of your performance of this song. You were sitting at a Steinway piano, (£50,000<sup>11</sup>). The gorgeous room you were in was one of the many in your mansion, Tittenhurst Park, a stately manor of a building set in 65 acres of grounds and valued as recently as 2009 to be worth something in the region of £30,000,000. Most of the people in the world live off the table scraps of the rich. They have no possessions to speak of. They don't need to imagine a life without basic comforts (as you seem to be asking the rest of us to do), they already endure a life without even the most basic of necessities. They do not possess clean water, they do not possess enough food to eat, they do not possess access to medical services. And they die—or worse, watch their children die—for the want of these possessions that you take for granted. Can you imagine a life without mansions, thousand-pound suits, the Rolls Royce and whatever else it is you possess to indulge your imagination?

*No need for greed or hunger*

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<sup>9</sup> United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 13.

<sup>10</sup> The War of Jenkins' Ear, 1739-1748. England vs. Spain. Okay, it was over a little more than just an ear. If you're interested, why not google it?

<sup>11</sup> At time of writing (Dec., 2011) one pound sterling was worth 120 Japanese yen.

*A brotherhood of man*

*Imagine all the people*

*Sharing all the world*

In the early 1970s, you left the UK to go and live in America. One of the reasons you gave for this decision was the “outrageous rate of tax” that you had to pay. The Labour government had placed an 87% tax on the extremely rich—the top 1% of the country. They intended to use this money to help the less fortunate in Britain as well as help Third World nations through aid and interest-free loans. Wasn’t that a noble intent? Your income at the time—translated into today’s terms— was roughly £20,000,000 a year. An 87% tax would still have left you with an annual income of over £2,000,000. £2,000,000! That’s more than most people in the First World earn in a lifetime. How much money do you need, Mr. Lennon? You are right. There is no need for greed. Greed is not about *need*, after all. Greed is about *want*. And greed, despite what the likes of Gordon Gekko might contend, is *not* good. Greed and hunger are the opposite sides of the same coin. Since there is only a finite quantity of resources on this Earth, the question I riddle you is this: “Do you believe that we all have the right to an equal share in Mother Earth’s bounty, or at the very least, the right to the bare minimum which would provide each and every man, woman and child on Earth with the necessities for a decent life?” When some have more, then others must have less. It’s not that complicated. The *sharing* of which you speak requires a redistribution of goods and resources and this is achieved through taxation. Imagine how many starving children could have been fed each year with your £18,000,000 tax contribution had you remained in Britain. What sorts of things did you spend that money on, by the way? Oh, that’s right! For one, you bought a second home, the apartment downstairs from yours in the Dakota Building where you lived in New York. You used this second multi-million-dollar dwelling as a storage facility for Yoko’s clothes, if memory serves. What a pity you preferred not to share with all the world.

*You may say that I’m a dreamer*

*But I’m not the only one*

Yes, Mr. Lennon, you are a dreamer. And sadly, you are not the only one. In order to dream, you have to be asleep. Dreamers imagine a better world but refrain from actually doing anything, from getting their hands dirty or making the necessary sacrifices required to achieve that goal. You are a ‘Walter Mitty’, Mr. Lennon. You dream, you imagine and you expect a Utopia to come about with good thoughts alone. All of the benefits and rights that we enjoy today have been paid for with the blood and sweat and tears of our forefathers, who were not dreamers, but rather they had dreams and got off their behinds to make those dreams realities. They dreamed of a world where children could no longer be sent up chimneys or press-ganged into the naval

service to toil as powder monkeys. They dreamed of a world where everyone—regardless of gender, class or income—had the right to vote, of a world where education and health services were the birthrights of all citizens, not just the privilege of an elite minority. They dreamed of a world where workers had the right to form unions to protect their rights rather than being at the mercy of their employers, of a world where a man is innocent until proven guilty, where the burden of proof lay with the accuser and not with the accused. Frankly, if you knew your own country's history, the achievements of English men and women who went before you, you might have been humbled by their sacrifices and the rest of us would have been spared this patronizing ditty of yours. I could go on, Mr. Lennon, but I don't think I need to for surely you get my point. So, keep your dreams—imagined or otherwise—to yourself. They mean nothing really, do they? Words, unlike your Saville Row suits, are cheap.

Yours sincerely,

Maurice Jamall, Tokyo, 2011

PS: Did you really bury Paul?<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ever heard of the, 'Paul died in a car crash in 1966 and was replaced by a double' conspiracy? If you're interested, simply google: Paul Dead 1966.