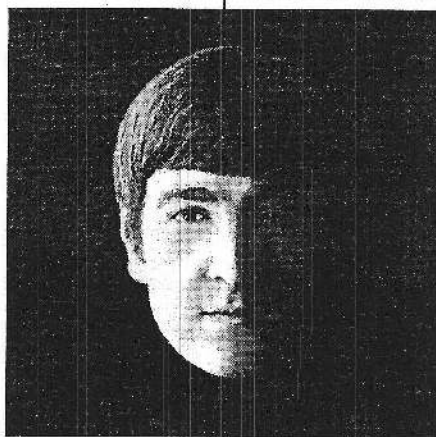


In Search of the Beatle Who Spent Two Decades Seeking True Love and Cranial Bliss Only to Discover Cows, Daytime Television, and Palm Beach Real Estate

John Lennon, Where Are You?

BY LAURENCE SHAMES



I WAS SITTING IN A SOMBER dive in Kearny, New Jersey, one marsh over from Newark, talking to a woman who claimed to have some information. She said that she had known John Lennon for nearly a decade and was his bosom buddy. I took this with a grain of salt because of the way she looked. The frail had blue eyelids, seemed to be the victim of a home perma-

ment, and looked as if she fed on massive doses of carbohydrates. Still, in her wallet she had a cracked old photograph of the man himself, sitting next to her in somebody's back yard. If it was a fake, it was niftily done. So I let her talk. Lennon was her hero. She was so excited I was afraid she'd slide right off her chair. I bought

her two drinks, and after wrestling with her conscience she gave me two unlisted phone numbers with which I could track him down. They turned out to be duds. One of them put me through to a company that manages ballet dancers, and the other gave me some fancy Hollywood studio that produces *Tenspeed and Brown Shoe*.

And that's what the whole damn job was like. False leads, dead ends, witnesses about as credible as hair-restorer ads. I never did get my man. I made sure he knew I was looking for him, and he made sure I figured out there was no way he'd let himself be found. John Lennon is in hiding, and doing a pretty impressive job of it, considering the whole world knows his face: that bent nose with the chiseled tip, that wry and saintly thin-lipped mouth, those slit eyes behind the famous wire-rims. But he's intent on going undiscovered, and he has the money and the favors owed to manage it. Everyone he knows is sworn to silence.

So I decided I didn't want to meet him after all. I'd go after things that couldn't be hidden, instead. Like his mansions: I found four of them, and there are others. Like his cows: I found fifty or so, and there are two hundred more. I found his pastures, his swimming pools, the woman who sends him organic kohlrabies and fertile eggs from his own greenhouse in upstate New York. I found his lawyer, and I tried like hell to find his yacht. I found several rags-to-riches-to-rags-again members of his former bands, and I found slurred-speeched, burned-out Beatlemaniacs who even now hang around his neighborhoods, hungering for a glimpse of him. I found his and his attorneys' micro-filmed signature on millions of dollars' worth of deeds and mortgages. I found his

LAURENCE SHAMES, a New York-based journalist, is a frequent contributor to *Esquire*.

private piece of Florida beach. And the more I found, the happier I was that I hadn't succeeded in smoking out Lennon himself. He wouldn't have been the Lennon I went looking for.

The Lennon I went looking for was after other things. He was a man who had always taken chances—musical chances, political chances, chances with his own frail sanity. I went looking for the Lennon who by his unflinching slit-eyed stare, by his appalling honesty, had shamed the world into examining itself. I was looking for the Lennon who had always shot his mouth off, who had offended everyone without having to try. My Lennon was a bitter clown, a man of extravagant error and vast resilience, a big baby, an often pathetic truth-seeker whose pained, goofy, earnest, and paranoid visage was the emblem and conscience of an age.

MY LENNON was a bitter clown, a man of extravagant error and vast resilience, a big baby, an often pathetic truth-seeker whose pained, goofy, earnest, and paranoid visage was the emblem and conscience of an age.

The Lennon I would have found is a forty-year-old businessman who watches a lot of television, who's got \$150 million, a son whom he dotes on, and a wife who intercepts his phone calls. He's got good lawyers to squeeze him through tax loopholes, and he's learned the political advantages of silence. He doesn't do anything ridiculous anymore. He's stopped making errors and he's stopped making music. And as I chased his shadow from estate to estate, from fortress to fortress, as I tried to piece together his present life from chats with realtors and clerks in health-food stores and with people who weren't at liberty to talk to me, all the questions I'd had in mind to ask him reduced themselves to one quick query that could be answered with an all-deciding yes or no: Is it true, John? Have you really given up?

IT WAS THAT CRAZY AD IN *THE New York Times* that first made me think of tracking him down. The thing ran on May 27, 1979. It was called "A Love Letter from John and Yoko to People Who Ask Us What, When and Why." It was smarmy enough to embarrass Barry Manilow. The ad covered a full page and cost \$18,240; it was intended to bring the world up to date on what had gone on in the three years since Lennon had last deigned to make a public statement. It told us, "The plants are growing. The cats are purring," and "magic is logical." The Lennons informed us of their current political strategies: "The things we have tried to achieve in the past by flashing a V sign, we try now through wishing.... It works." On the

interpersonal front, we were advised that "when somebody is angry with us, we draw a halo around his or her head in our minds." As to their lack of productivity, they assured us that their silence is "a silence of love and not of indifference." Finally, on the subject of human possibilities, they told us, presumably without irony, that "if two people like us can do what we are doing with our lives, any miracle is possible!"

Now, what the hell was this soggy nonsense all about? Could this be Lennon—Lennon the Fierce, Lennon the Snide, the snarling Walrus who had written those knife-edged lyrics and sung those nasty vocals? Had he become an aging hippie? Had his much-drugged, much-picked brain turned to Wheatena at last? He'd done everything he could to disappear; why remind us of his presence, unless he had something to sell?

The months passed, though, and there was no new John Lennon album. Not even a single. The Walrus had submerged again. But his absence was no longer perfect; it had been broken by that moment of exposure, that teasing message. Lennon was playing Culture Hero Hide-and-Seek. Well, all right, then: it was a game I could play, too.

I hit the public library and dug up everything written about the man since the Bicentennial. There wasn't much. In February 1978, *The New York Times* ran an item saying that Lennon had purchased about a thousand acres in upstate New York and intended to raise registered Holsteins. The reported price of the land was \$178,000, which turned out to be about a third of what it really cost, but I'll get to that.

In October of 1979 it was disclosed that Lennon had donated \$1,000 to the New York Patrolmen's Benevolent Association to outfit city cops with bulletproof vests.

Also in 1979, published reports indicated that the Lennons, who already owned twenty-eight rooms in the Dakota, a landmark Manhattan co-op, regularly bid on every apartment that came available, implacably topping all other offers by up to \$30,000. "It's just that John and I have always wanted to live in a house," explained Yoko.

The Lennons seem to have some unique ideas about interior decoration. Thinking it would be different to have an oriental teahouse in New York, they had one sent over piece by piece. But when they tried to put it back together, it

wouldn't fit into their apartment. It was not reported why no one measured it beforehand.

Moving into 1980, references to Lennon grew even sparser. On February 3, the *Los Angeles Times* let out that he'd forked over \$700,000 for a beachfront home in Palm Beach, Florida. In May, the *New York Daily News* reported that Lennon had picked up a sixty-three-foot sailboat and was mooring it on Long Island, where he also happened to own a home—this one a \$450,000 gabled job in Cold Spring Harbor.

And that's about all the world had heard of John Ono Lennon since 1976. It wasn't much, but there was a clear pattern to it: Lennon got written up when he bought something. He remained a celebrity because of his purchasing power.

It hadn't always been that way. Lennon used to earn his ink because of what he *did*. Even when he looked silly—inviting the press to his honeymoon with Yoko, "appearing" in a canvas bag humming snatches of "The Blue Danube," filming a fifteen-minute slow-motion study of his penis—the Lennon of those post-Beatle days was a holy fool, a slapstick saint who took ludicrous falls and never seemed to notice he'd been tripped. He made an ass of himself again and again. It was his finest hour. There was a burning madcap purity to everything he did that could almost make you cry. It seems about a million years ago.

IN EARLY JULY OF THIS YEAR LENNON made the papers again, in a way that broke the pattern. It wasn't something he bought that made him newsworthy this time: it was something he sold.

One of his Holsteins had fetched a record-breaking \$265,000 at the New York State Fair in Syracuse. This miraculous cheesemaker was expected to squirt out fifty thousand pounds of milk a year. According to *The New York Times*, she was only one of about two hundred fifty cows owned by Lennon and an unnamed partner. Said a spokesman for John and Yoko: "They're not eager to sell too many Holsteins because of their love for the animals." Well, for Chrissake, at \$265,000 per, how many do you *need* to sell? In any case, there were two hundred forty-nine cows left, and I was determined to find them. They were, after all, John Lennon's cows. They might be the closest I'd ever get to Lennon.

I had a vague idea where they were. The *Times* article that had reported the original dairy deal back in 1978 was dated Delhi, New York. So I rented an inconspicuous subcompact and hit the highway.

Delhi is a sleepy little burg nestled in the Catskill Mountains, in the midst of real all-American farm country. There's a Main Street, a Grand Union, and a classic diner.

It was there I repaired to drink coffee and pick the brains of the locals.

By the second cup I'd learned that the smart money in the area was on Dream Street farms, a dairy conglomerate that administered some fifteen properties and specialized in Holsteins, the Cadillac of milk cows. Having no doubt that our hero was in with the smart money—since Lennon had stopped making financial boo-boos around 1975—I resolved to call Dream Street's office.

A secretary picked up the phone, and I told her I wanted to talk with the boss about John Lennon's cows. She asked me who I was, and like a fool I told her. She vanished from the line like a rock sliding under water and returned a minute later to tell me, "We are not at liberty to discuss anything pertaining to the Lennons' holdings." Lennon, who used to get himself into glorious hot water by giving people answers to questions they hadn't even asked, has a lot of people keeping secrets for him now.

But cows just aren't that easy to hide. They're large animals. There are ways to find them.

Conveniently enough, Delhi is the seat of Delaware County, and the county clerk's office was stashed in an eighteenth-century red brick courthouse within spitting distance of the diner. Half an hour spent amid the vast and dusty record books, poring through the handwritten entries, netted me plenty to go on. In December 1977, Lennon had bought eight parcels of land covered by four separate deeds. The assessed value of the properties was put at \$427,000, and the rule of thumb is that the actual worth of the land is half again as much. The total area was just over 1,600 acres. If you have trouble grasping what an acre is, picture a football field. Picture 1,600 football fields, and you know how much of the Catskills Lennon owns.

The only problem was, his parcels weren't in a nice big block. They were scattered all over the place. It seemed as if Lennon had wanted to buy up the corners of the county and fill in the middle later. But I got hold of a map that was only slightly smaller than the county itself and spent the afternoon trespassing.

It turned out to be sort of hard on the car. There aren't many roads up there, and John Lennon, fugitive from fame, seemed to have a penchant for hideouts way back in the woods. But after miles of wrong turns and rutted roads, one of which punched a hole in my muffler, my luck

changed. As I went roaring down county road 18, the information on the map seemed too simple to believe: one of the Walrus's holdings was supposed to be right at the side of this paved and civilized thoroughfare. I watched for landmarks, crossed my fingers, and at length arrived at the Argyle Farm, a member of the Dream Street group.

I pulled off the road and approached the farmhouse. At the white front door I concocted a spiel. This time I'd be smart. I'd lie. I knocked on the door and a woman appeared—blond, husky, and carrying a baby. She wasn't Yoko Ono.

I told her I was interested in investing in Dream Street and asked if I could have a look around. She said she'd fetch her husband, and did so with a yell.

"Interested in Dream Street, are ya?" the farmer asked, when his wife had passed along the story.

I nodded.

"Well, you can't buy this farm," he said. "This here's John Lennon's farm."

Bless the farmer's guileless rural heart, which holds that some things, at least, are sacred. He'd no sooner lie about the ownership of stock or land than falsify his name.

"Technically, though, it's part of Dream Street," he went on, after I'd made a suitable gesture of being impressed. "I work it for 'em. Be happy to show ya around if ya like."

His name was Bill Furner. He took me to the barn and showed me John Lennon's cows. They were huge dappled creatures, man-high at the rumps, with fine square skeletons, backs broad enough to play poker on, and udders the size of kettledrums.

It was milking time, and the distended sacs were veiny with weight and strain, the teats rigid as a high-pressure hose. The cows lowed and moored, and I wondered if they had any inkling that their owner had done amazing things a long time ago.

"Lotta money in those cows," Bill Furner said, going straight to the heart of the matter as he made his rounds with me. He smacked flanks and petted foreheads. "All top quality," he said, pointing to the family tree above one of the beasts. "That Yoko Ono writes up a mean pedigree. She's the one who really knows the business, ya know."

"Yeah. Well, I'll bet Lennon loves these animals, though," I said, just to keep the conversation going. After all, I'd read that in the *Times*. "He come up here often?"

Furner looked at me sideways. "I've never even met him," he said, "and I've been working the place a year."

"But it's his farm," I said. "How does he know what goes on?"

"Oh, Dream Street takes care of that," said Furner. "Sends him a computer print-out every week. Tells him everything he needs to know."

So much for the pastoral fantasy, I thought. The cows are only real estate with teats.

"Besides," Furner went on, "he's got someone who sort of oversees his interests up here. Woman named Penny King. Takes care of one of his other houses, over in Sidney. She grows vegetables and eggs for him, too, and ships 'em down to New York. I hear he's pretty fussy about what he eats."

"Vegetarian, I hear."

"To each his own," said Bill Furner, slapping a cow. "Me, I like a nice piece of beef."

I thanked him for the tour and headed for my car. I'd already opened the door when something else occurred to me. The paper said that Lennon owned two hundred fifty Holsteins—and there weren't more than fifty or so in the barn.

"Hey, Bill," I shouted back, "where are the rest of his cows?"

Furner gave an elaborate shrug. "Who knows? Some in Vermont maybe. Virginia. I hear he's got farms all up and down the coast."

My God, I thought, the man's in a class with Frank Perdue.

IT WAS DUSK BY THE TIME I found the house that Penny King takes care of for Lennon.

This one was a beaut—a vintage colonial with greenhouse attached, with about a mile of porch from which you could peer down a hillside at East Sidney Lake and the checkerboard valley beyond. A gin-and-tonic and a can of bug spray, and you'd have it made.

Owing to the noisy state of my exhaust system, I didn't exactly take Penny King by surprise. I putt-putted down the path that passed for a driveway and found her poised in front of a pickup truck, wearing jeans and a sweat shirt and holding a bottle of Windex. She didn't seem the least bit frightened of me, and she didn't have to be: had it come to a tussle, she could have broken my spine. She was hearty if not Wagnerian, and there was something in her bearing that told me I wasn't going to get away with any fibs.

I rolled down my window and said hello. She said it back.

"Is this John Lennon's house?" I asked.

"Are you a reporter?" she asked.

"No, I'm George Harrison."

Penny King was not amused. "Well," she said, "I hope you had a nice ride up. I can recommend a decent place

THE LENNON I would have found is a businessman with good lawyers who can squeeze him through loopholes. He's got \$150 million and a wife who intercepts his phone calls. And he doesn't do the ridiculous anymore.

for dinner if you're hungry."

"Why don't we eat here?" I coaxed. "Some nice organic vegetables, some fertile eggs. Like John eats."

"I really can't talk to you," she said.

"Why not?"

She frowned and paused, the demands of the stonewall clashing with her franker impulses. It was a moment straight from a spy movie, when the good but misguided lady agent must decide whether to reveal German secrets to the imploring American. She decided not to. "Look," she said, "I have a nice arrangement here. Your job is to find things out, my job is not to help you. That's fair, isn't it?"

I really couldn't argue. She was Lennon's employee, after all, and silence came with the job.

THE WALRUS may have eased into the Eighties munching Penny King's homegrown greens, but he'd tumbled into the Seventies screaming for his mommy.

This was the Primal phase. It followed on the heels of the peace-love-and-mysticism stage and, typically for Lennon, was a total refutation of what had gone before. The Primal phase was the period when Lennon turned away from the world's business and got down to the desperately private and ultimately boring process of feeling his own pain.

Characteristically, he found a new guru to usher him through it. The sage was California psychotherapist Arthur Janov, author of *The Primal Scream* and the high priest of rage. It was Janov's contention that such demons as the specters of unloving parents could be exorcised by wailing, shrieking, beating up large pillows, and collapsing in a hysterical heap on the floor. So Lennon, whose *modus operandi* at the time was to believe anything until it was disproved, moved to the Los Angeles suburbs and howled dutifully for a full third of 1970. He howled in the morning and he howled at night. He howled over lunch. The experience put him on speaking terms with certain intimate devils that had been tweaking him all his life, but when it was over it seemed that he had howled away his sense of humor. He emerged from therapy hoarse and solemn.

It showed on his so-called primal album, *John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band*, perhaps the most agonizing piece of vinyl ever pressed. In the course of eleven gut-wrenching songs, you can hear Lennon yelp about God, the death of his mother, isolation, manipulation, masturbation, and several species of terror.

He released several other albums in the early Seventies and got plenty of publicity, but the whole feel of it was different. He was still larger than life, but he was not really *part* of life. The times were congealing around him; he was caught like a mastodon in ice. The hazy philosophies of the Sixties were hardening into categories, and Lennon was getting pegged.

He was a radical, not much different from other radicals. He wore a hard hat and discussed Mao. He gave interviews to underground revolutionary journals. He

played political benefits and spoke out in favor of women, gays, and everybody poor. He became orthodox. He came to be feared and hated in high places, and Nixon's functionaries in the Justice Department started up the grimy machinery to throw him out of the country.

"THERE'S THIS guy you should talk to," I was told, "who

was with Lennon in the radical days. Name of Peel. He was with him in the streets."

"Terrific," I said. "But that was a long time ago. Where is he now?"

"Peel? He's still in the streets. In fact, he is the streets. Just ask around the Village. You'll find him."

It turned out I found him without ever leaving my apartment. Unharassed by fans, David Peel, formerly with the Plastic Ono Band, et cetera, et cetera, is listed in the Manhattan white pages. He has no one intercepting his phone calls. He picked up on the second ring, and when I told him I wanted to talk about John Lennon, he answered with a forthrightness I admired. "Buy me a meal," he said, "and I'll talk to you all day."

So I headed downtown to Peel's walk-up apartment on Fifth Street, off the Bowery. I climbed five flights of back stairs. At the top landing I pounded the door several times, and Peel finally appeared. He was short and didn't look as though he got out in the sun very much.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, man," he said. "I was layin' down this new song. Come on in. Siddown."

I walked in and flopped down on one of the strangest sofas I'd ever seen. It appeared to be a disemboweled Castro convertible covered with a few yards of the original Yankee Stadium infield tarp. There were black-light posters on the walls. There were books and records in orange-crates shelves. The windowpanes were painted over, and the *Abbey Road* album cover was thumbtacked onto the wall above the turntable. Peel had an audio

setup worthy of a small recording studio, but the value of the remaining furnishings could have been computed in pesos. I suddenly had a feeling of having been there before, and then I realized that I had: in 1969 every apartment looked that way. I'd entered an interior decoration time-warp.

Peel was sitting on a low stool that had three legs out of four. "So, David," I asked him, "what can you tell me about John Lennon?"

I might as well have asked Papa Hemingway what he could tell me about fighting bulls. I hadn't yet realized that I was dealing with an utter fanatic, a Beatlemaniac par excellence, a man whom the Fab Four had touched so deeply that time had frozen in their absence, that the world had dimmed since their demise.

In 1974 Peel had cut a record called "Bring Back the Beatles," but this was the closest he had ever come to acknowledging they were gone. The song ran on Peel's own label, Orange Records—"Apple to the core, Orange to the pits," as he is fond of saying. He keeps Beatles archives. He has written Beatles stories. This fall he released an album called *John Lennon for President*. So intent is he on passing on the sacred flame that he has founded a rock 'n' roll university, of which he is administration, faculty, and staff.

"I first met Lennon," he began, "in 1971, in Limbo Clothing on St. Mark's Place. A few weeks later I'm playing in Washington Square park—street music, you know—and, like always, I've got a big crowd. I'm just about to go into 'The Pope Smokes Dope' when someone comes up to me and says, 'Look over there—it's John and Yoko.' And there they were, watching me. So I grabbed a photographer and said, 'Photographer, you go up to them and click away. I don't care how uptight they get. Get twelve. Don't tell 'em I told you to do it. We'll get the history and apologize later.' I wasn't using them, you see, I was using who they were."

I nodded, though the distinction struck me as a little hazy.

"Anyway," Peel went on, "from there on it gets a little complicated. The big radicals were looking for a big singer like Lennon. I was a radical singer with a ready-made band. So we all got together. We played New York, we played Ann Arbor. We played on the *The David Frost Show*. When Lennon lived on Bank Street I used to go over to his house to watch TV. Yeah, we'd just lay around and watch the tube. Yoko would cook up some macrobiotic stuff. I gave Yoko a gift when I first met her. It was a dead cockroach with its arms crossed over its chest, in a beautiful wooden box lined with purple velvet. Underneath it I wrote DEATH OF A COCKROACH, BORN UNKNOWN, DIED 1972, REST IN PEACE. She dug the whole thing."

But then Peel had lost contact with Lennon around 1976, the same year every-

body had. From then on, all he knew was the same blend of hearsay and wishful thinking that was the common coin of groupies everywhere. He took a radical's vindictive relish in discussing Lennon's investments with me.

"Look at the people who were hassling him back then," he said. "There's no more President Nixon. Mitchell's been to jail, and his old lady died. And meanwhile, my boy John's buying up half the country. Moral of the story: don't mess with the Beatles."

But there was another side to it that Peel didn't seem to want to recognize. Lennon hadn't licked the old order; he'd joined it. And in so doing, he'd left his former comrades flat. You don't see the Walrus walking the streets of the East Village anymore. You don't see him going through the alleyway and up the back stairs to pay his old friend David Peel a call.

"You miss him, David?" I asked.

It was a wounding question, like asking a tormented monk about a crisis of faith, and for a second I thought Peel would start to cry. But then his face took on a retrospective glow. He'd made music with Lennon; he'd known his idol for that frozen moment when the Walrus's many-phased life had taken him through Peel's streets. "You can't expect to stay friends with Lennon forever," he said at last. Then he leaned toward me and added, as if it explained everything: "When you come right down to it, he's still a millionaire."

WHEN JOHN LENNON FELL IN love with Yoko Ono back in 1968, the whole world was grossed out. As time went on, however, people realized it was the *quality* of Lennon's love, and not its object, that mattered. His love was courtly, boundless, and desperate. In the lawlessness of his passion he rivaled Heathcliff, and in the unabashed sentimentality of his love songs he outgushed Rod McKuen.

It was distressing, then, when it turned out that he was not the perfect and eternal lover but just another mortal husband, and an erring one at that: in October 1973 he left Yoko. What made it even more deflating was the unspeakably ordinary way he made his exit. He went out for a paper and just didn't come back.

Instead, he flew to Los Angeles and proceeded to indulge himself in a flamboyant but by no means original mid-life crisis. For something over a year he drank like a fish, made headlines as a barroom pugilist, and generally comported himself in a cheesy manner. He shot a lot of pool and woke up in a lot of places where he didn't remember going to sleep. He was often seen in the company of the beautiful May Pang, his former secretary. Once he appeared at a restaurant with a Kotex stuck on his forehead. He asked the waitress if she knew who he was, and she

responded, "Yeah, you're an asshole with a Kotex on." The Walrus had found the perfect incognito.

Typically, Lennon's last stand was colorful. But it couldn't go on. Early in 1975 he returned to Yoko, announcing that "the separation didn't work out." "I have this great fear of this *normal* thing," he said then, even as he eased back into that very choice. "I don't want to grow up, but I'm sick of not growing up."

So he decided to take a shot at it. On October 9, 1975, his thirty-fifth birthday, Yoko presented him with a son, Sean Ono Lennon, and the Walrus has taken to fatherhood as if it were a new religion. He is enraptured. One of his last publicly reported statements during this period was, in fact, "Watch out for the baby-fingers!"—uttered as he closed the limo door to head out for some new adventure with little Sean.

Shortly after becoming a father, Lennon also became, if not exactly a solid citizen, at least a law-abiding and heftily taxed resident alien. On July 27, 1976, his immigration case was finally concluded and he was awarded a green card. He showed up for his hearing in a starched white shirt, a narrow tie, and a highly conservative suit. He vowed to dedicate himself "to wife, kids, and a job." Within six months, he had become such a persona grata in official circles that he was invited to Jimmy Carter's inaugural gala.

With family and legality taken care of, John Lennon needed only one more element to feel like a real grown-up. That element was control of his investments.

He'd be smart this time: no more Allen Kleins, no more hippy-dippy schemes like Apple, no more flaky ventures in the music business. This time he was after something durable. This time he'd go for land.

He jumped into the real estate game with a company called Pentacles Realty Inc., presided over by a New York lawyer with the priceless name of David Warmflash. The company has done so well that it was announced in June 1980 that Lennon wanted to unload his 25 percent of Apple. Music, after all, is chancy, and Lennon doesn't like to take chances anymore.

A glorified groupie I spoke with did me the favor of telling me that Lennon had an estate out in Bellport, on Long Island. So I rented another car and drove east.

From the outskirts, Bellport didn't seem to be the sort of town the new John Lennon would like. There are poor people

in it. The houses are small, and there are no big hedges to hide behind. But that's only till you get near the water, where the rich get the first sniff at the salt air. There the houses grow to manorial proportions and huge trees throw entire blocks into shade. Driveways come as occasional breaks in the forest, and mailboxes are unmarked. They must have psychics for mailmen in neighborhoods like that. It seemed the right setting for Lennon.

Problem was, I had no idea where to start looking, and how many driveways can you make U-turns in before somebody calls the cops? So I drove to the beach and stared out to sea, waiting for an inspiration. In its place, off to the east, on a point of land whose distance was impossible to measure through the haze, I saw what might have been a pagoda. Could this be the pagoda that wouldn't fit into the Dakota?

I dove back into the car and headed for that mysterious point. It kept receding, disappearing behind dead-end streets, shut off from me by housing developments that ended in culs-de-sac. The pagoda flirted with me through trees, came and went as I traced out the disorienting curves of the jagged coastline. I chased that crazy roof for three quarters of an hour, and when I finally caught up with it, it turned out to belong to a Reform synagogue of contemporary design.

I turned the car around and yielded to self-mockery. At a stop sign, I saw a kid on a bicycle. I rolled down my window and screamed at him, "Hey, Junior, seen John Lennon?"

The kid slammed on his brakes, looked for a second like he'd just been offered candy by a pervert, then said, "Not lately."

"Not lately?"

"Naw. I used to see him all the time, though. My father almost sold him a house."

"Who's your father?"

"Jeff Buck. I'm Bryce Buck."

They sounded like

a couple of characters from *The Jetsons*, but I wasn't arguing. "Where's your father now?"

"Home."

"Where's that?"

"Follow me."

So Bryce Buck burned rubber, popped a wheelie, and led me to his house. We found his father sitting in the kitchen, talking on the telephone and drinking a beer.

Jeff Buck, as it turned out, knew Lennon fairly well. He'd met him several years before, on the Caribbean island of Tortola.

LENNON HOWLED the Seventies away. He howled in the morning and he howled at night. After so much wailing, shrieking, and beating up of large pillows, he howled away his demons to emerge hoarse and solemn.

In 1978, looking for "a place to relax with their son" on Long Island, the Lennons contacted him and said they wanted a very private bayfront home.

"I found one for them," Buck explained. "A twelve-bedroom job with fifteen fireplaces, on four and a half acres of waterfront land. They couldn't have asked for more."

But they didn't buy the house. Yoko started making inquiries and was told that Bellport was "a real welfare town," plagued by vandalism, bad karma, and other problems symptomatic of the rich and the poor's getting on each other's nerves. Buck denied the allegations, but to no avail. Yoko was freaked, and the deal was off. To this day Buck refers to her as "a pain in the ass."

His memories of Lennon, though, are fond. "One time I was showing Yoko another house," he said—"which I knew she wouldn't take anyway, because the hedges were too low—and while I showed her the rooms, John sat at a grand piano and just fiddled for half an hour. He got lost in it. He seemed happy."

Buck sees Lennon as "a depressed guy who watches a whole lot of TV and doesn't quite know what to do with himself. He once told me he'd give anything just to be able to walk down the street like anybody else and buy his kid an ice cream cone. He's a prisoner."

"But where's the prison, Jeff?" I asked. "Where did he end up buying?"

Buck shrugged. "If I were sure, I wouldn't tell you. But it might be Northport."

He walked me to the car. "You know," Buck said, "if he's really as sick of being recognized as he says he is, why doesn't he at least change his glasses? That'd be half the battle, don'tcha think?"

In Northport I spoke to a realtor in a polyester shirt and loud tie who told me right up front that his turf probably wasn't classy enough for a guy like Lennon. From his looks I didn't doubt it for a minute. He told me to try Cold Spring Harbor.

In Cold Spring Harbor I spoke to another realtor, and this one was classy to spare. She looked as if she clipped coupons for a living and real estate was just her hobby. She didn't have a stitch on that wasn't natural fiber, and it wasn't tailored in Taiwan, either. An aristocratic gleam came into her eye as soon as I mentioned Lennon, and for half an hour we sat in her office and played I-know-something-you-don't-know. She was quite a tease. She

must've gone to Wellesley. She tantalized me with half-replies as discretion wrestled with the urge to gossip, as she contended with her lust to show off what she knew about a Magic Person such as Lennon. Yes, she told me, he'd bought in the area, though not through her agency. Yes, she

knew how much he'd paid, but she couldn't tell me. Uh-huh, she knew the house, all right, but its location wasn't public information.

So I had two choices. I could tie her to the chair and beat it out of her, or I could tease her in return. Yeah, I was writing something, but I couldn't say what. Sure, I'd found out lots of other stuff, but I couldn't

just blab it all over town....

So we changed the game: Now we were playing you-show-me-yours-and-I'll-show-you-mine—culture hero tit-for-tat. I got what I'd come for. The classy realtor tried to ease her conscience about the beans she'd spilled by telling me that the house wasn't really visible from the land side anyway.

"So I'll get a boat," I said.

She rearranged her knees for the fifteenth time and gave a high-class little titter. I guess she thought I was kidding.

It was windy as hell out there on the Sound. So windy, in fact, that the mainsail popped and strained, the starboard gunwale paralleled the water, and the binoculars kept bending my eyelashes as I tried to keep them trained on Lennon's house. I wedged myself in like Odysseus in the straits while I took stock of the Gatsbyesque layout before me. It was real 1920s Gold Coast, right up to the quirky mansard roof. The house was of wooden shingles and big enough that, lit up at night, it must've looked like a small village to the folks on the Connecticut side. There was a jumbo patio and a gorgeous lawn, and I suddenly pictured the Walrus playing croquet. There was a swing set and a sliding board for little Sean. For Yoko there was no pagoda, but there was a gazebo. There were at least two cars in the long and winding driveway, but my boat was rocking so much I couldn't tell what kind they were. There were four chimneys. Of

Lennon himself there was not the slightest evidence.

There was a very droll reason for his absence. While I was bobbing in the Sound looking for Lennon on the land, Lennon was off on the high seas somewhere. The Working Class Hero had taken up yachting. He'd chartered a sloop called—get this—*Strawberry Fields*, and was sailing from Newport to Bermuda. The charter deal was designed to give the Walrus a chance to learn the ropes so that someday he could captain his own craft, the *Isis*.

Can you picture Lennon in a skipper's cap, one of those navy-blue numbers with a ship's-wheel insignia on the crown, the kind you see paunchy old men wearing in New Jersey seafood restaurants? Can you see him lounging on the deck, nursing a shakerful of martinis and reading *Dynasty Review*?

Tell us, John: has it really come to that? I'd stalked him on land, I'd stalked him at sea. And now I stalked him in the air.

I hopped a plane and flew to Palm Beach, the most bizarre of all of Lennon's haunts. Palm Beach isn't exactly Peppermintland. Workers who come onto the island to tend to the estates carry ID cards to justify their presence. The town is a proper little madhouse of unbroken leisure.

The Walrus has a mansion there. In a life not lacking in incongruities, this stands out as weird. Why, of all the places in the civilized world that offer winter sunshine and the chance to take a swim, should he have ended up in Palm Beach, Florida? It's not a question of selling out; it's a matter of taste. Wouldn't he be bored down there, his rampaging intellect running smack into

pastel stucco walls and falling flat on tar-colored lawns with all the texture mowed right out of them? What's there for him to do, sip champagne with the Listerine heiress, go to charity balls in black tie and pointy shoes? No, it's too grotesque.

I started dropping in on people and trying to offend them. If I could get the good people of Palm Beach to describe

him as a misfit, a subversive, a blight on the neighborhood, I would be comforted. He's got a yellow wife, I said, and a past associated with radical politics and a notorious taste for drugs. You don't really like having him here, do you?

But it was all for nought. The Palm Beachers like Lennon, which made me feel queasy. They think he's a swell neighbor. He's got tons of money and he doesn't litter. The Walrus, as they see it, is one of them. And, God help him, they may be

WHEN JOHN Lennon fell in love with Yoko Ono, the whole world was grossed out. His love was boundless. In the lawlessness of his passion he rivaled Heathcliff, and in his love songs he outgushed Rod McKuen.

BUCK SEES Lennon as "a depressed guy who watches a lot of TV and doesn't quite know what to do with himself." Lennon once told Buck he'd "give anything just to be able to walk down the street like anybody else."

right. The lad from Liverpool is very much at home in Palm Beach. So much so that he actually walks the streets in daylight there. People have actually *seen* him. There was something slightly spooky about these Lennon sightings, though: the man never looked the same twice, and as I pumped my car all over town tracking down the stories, I almost forgot whom I was looking for. A woman who'd applied for a job as his live-in caretaker said he looked "a lot like Sigmund Freud." A waitress who'd served him breakfast at the Breakers said it couldn't really have been Lennon that she saw, because Lennon looked like "an underfed Henri Matisse." An anonymous dowager in a position to know described him as "a scraggly Prince Charles," and a fellow who saw him buying agar-agar in a health food store claimed that he most closely resembled "a Menonite rabbi, or whatever they have."

There's a story about a writer from a Florida weekly who knocked on his door, only to be told that Lennon didn't live there. It wasn't till hours later that he realized that the man at the door had been Lennon himself.

In any case, he'd disappeared from Florida when I was down there stalking him. Real Palm Beach residents are there only at certain fashionable times of the year, and this wasn't one of them. So I went and gawked at his empty house. People give their houses names down there, as if they were small Central American nations. Lennon's is called El Salano. It's a Moorish monster that was built in 1919 by hotshot architect Addison Mizner. The Vanderbilts owned it for a while. Then the McLeans had it. The McLeans, not quite so famous as the Vanderbilts, might be remembered as the last owners of the Hope diamond before it went to the Smithsonian. More recently, El Salano was rented by Larry Flynt—under an innocuous corporate name—and used as an upper-crust backdrop for groin shots. El Salano has seven bedrooms, five servants' rooms, an indoor pool, an outdoor pool, and fifty yards of some of the most expensive sand on the planet. It costs upward of fifty grand a year to maintain. Lennon spends a month or so there in the winter.

I pulled into the driveway, trying to figure out a line to use if the Palm Beach cops came by. I stashed the car where it couldn't be seen from South Ocean Boulevard and strolled around the grounds. The place was pretty ritzy, with one of those orange-tiled roofs that make you think of Spain or San Diego. The house was ringed by waxy-leaved trees that rustled slightly and gave off a narcotic scent that could stop you in your tracks. You could just faintly hear the ocean. Blue water shimmered hypnotically in the pool. Heavy drapes hung in the windows; the rooms were probably cool and dim even in the heat of the day. I

yawned. Here I was, trespassing, scared, and I knew my pulse was supposed to be racing, but there was just something about that house that sapped me, that made me feel content and lazy. Maybe it was the sumptuous shrubbery, maybe it was the overhanging eaves that made rich shadows, maybe it was the subliminal influence of the giant TV antenna. Whatever it was, it made me groggy, and finally it dawned on me that that's what a house like this is *supposed* to do; it's custom-made for doing nothing, and only someone intent on doing nothing would live there. It all seemed clear now. I couldn't fend off admitting it any longer: John Lennon had retired. Or so it seemed. The Walrus I'd gone looking for had vanished from the face of the earth. The Lennon I knew—musician, zealot, clown—was no more, and someone else was masquerading in his place here in swank Palm Beach. Forget it. It was time to go home. I took a piece of gravel from his driveway as a souvenir and packed it in.

Maybe it was the Florida heat, or maybe it was the lingering smell of Lennon's yard, or maybe it was just the end of the stalking, but back home I felt very empty. I put on one of Lennon's records and made myself a drink. It occurred to me that there was no reason to take his retirement so damned personally, since I thought most of what he did on his own was lousy anyway. But when he was good, when he cut through to that simplicity or put that unblushing need in a love song or let his voice slide half an octave and cover the whole spectrum of sadness along the way, well, then he could really do it, then he could break your heart.

The phone rang. It was one of my contacts from the lunatic fringe of the music business, and I wasn't thrilled to hear from him. I'd had enough. Stalking the Walrus had convinced me that the best way to keep on friendly terms with the legend was to stay home and listen to his old records.

"He's coming out with an album," the contact told me.

"I've heard that one before," I said.

"No, it's true," the guy insisted. "It's top secret right now, but it'll hit the papers any day. A Boston publicity firm is gonna let the news leak out in carefully measured doses. He's cutting it over at the Hit Factory. With Yoko. It might even turn out to be a double album."

I frowned at the phone. The first reluctant stirrings of hope were starting up in me again, and I felt like a jerk for getting

sucked back in. But that's the thing with Lennon's eerie stature: he could get the whole world jazzed about an album that might very well never see the light of day. And even if it did, with Yoko in on it, it could turn out to be the turkey of the season. Still, you hope. You know there's a hit-or-miss genius behind the microphone and maybe, just maybe, something startling will happen.

"Are you sure?" I asked. My voice trembled like that of a pilgrim who had just walked four thousand miles and then blinked right at the moment the miracle happened.

"They don't have a label yet and they don't have a title, but they've got the musicians and they've got the songs."

"Oh, yeah?" I said. "What kind of songs? 'Leisure Class Hero'?"

"Love songs," said my informant. "Very dreamy, and pretty erotic, I hear."

"Great. A *Two Virgins* for the country club set."

"It might be good," he said.

"Yes," I said, "it might."

"I have something else for you, too," he resumed. "I heard from someone who works for Lennon that he's got an isolation tank. You know, the kind they use in labs and all. Uses it a couple of times a week."

And so I guess that's the capper, the logical end point to what John Lennon has been up to lately. He's been courting oblivion, and, short of death, you can't get any closer than to hop into an isolation tank and close the lid behind you. His smothered sound, blots out light, van-

quishes gravity. It takes the world away. It's the last refuge of the harried, the paranoid, the pained.

I went back to my drink, turned up the record, and pictured the Walrus climbing in. Naked, silent, with who knows what terror or hope compelling him, he settles into the buoyant saline water. His body half-floats, half-submerges, his organs

dangle from their moorings. His famous face relaxes, the severe mouth softening at the corners, the slitted eyes half-closed. Peace is on the way. The top of the tank is slowly lowered. The light narrows to a wedge, a shaft, then disappears. Nothing is left but ungrounded ego ranging freely through an empty universe. There's nothing to stumble on, nothing to run into, and Lennon is safe at last, lost in that blessed aloneness, that elegant dark.

Well, he always did take things to extremes. **E**

PALM BEACHERS have seen Lennon. But there was something spooky about the sightings. The man never looked the same twice, and as I pumped my car all over town tracking down stories, I almost forgot whom I was looking for.

LETTERS

THE SOUND AND THE FURY

LENNON LETTERS

I CRIED for hours after I read Laurence Shames's article on John Lennon ("John Lennon, Where Are You?" November). Is this really where the searching prophet of the last two decades has found his long-sought truth—in social nihilism? Is this bourgeois character the same libertarian soul who screamed, "Power to the people"? Is it possible that that angry young man could donate money to a police department for bulletproof vests ten years later? They used to say that Paul was dead; I feel as if John—at least the John Lennon I knew and loved—has died. Maybe we just expected too much of him.

*Peggy S. Ruffra
Bloomington, Ind.*

I CONGRATULATE Laurence Shames for a well-written article about the phantom John Lennon. I, for one, am not surprised by the disappearance of the renowned Beatle. It is in keeping with his rather mysterious style, don't you think? And as for his domestication and flourishing interest in real estate—again, no surprise. Obviously he has found fulfillment beyond singing and songwriting. O-bla-di, o-bla-da, life goes on....

*John Collins
Fort Pierce, Fla.*

IT IS difficult to believe that Esquire would publish Laurence Shames's contemptuous report on John Lennon. If you need a backside to flay, dig up a congressman who's misappropriating funds or a record exec involved in payola.

John Lennon has made an honest fortune. He gave us music and love, we gave him love and money, and everyone found it a pretty fair bargain. Today he protects his earnings from rising taxes and inflation by investing in real estate.

There is no reason to publicize his finances and properties, cross-examine those who work for him, invade his privacy, slander his genius, and pass judgment on his very existence.

Shames writes with all the worldly insight of a disillusioned adolescent. Such shallow muckraking one expects of the scandal sheet press, not of Esquire. It's fortunate that he was not dedicated to journalism when he first became suspect of the cold facts concerning Santa Claus. I can see him scurrying over the ice floes at

the North Pole, hoping to milk information from the elves who manage Kris Kringle's reindeer.

*Carl Lindahl
New York, N.Y.*

ONE WOULD be hard pressed to find a finer example of a nonstory than Laurence Shames's "John Lennon, Where Are You?" Does an article amounting to nothing more than a catalog of Lennon's holdings and the author's pining for bygone days deserve a cover story?

And so what if the former Beatle has become an entrepreneur? Calling someone to task for being successful is a mid-Sixties cheap shot; so is asking him to live up to your artistic expectations. John Lennon has had a profound influence on me, too. But that doesn't give me any right to point a pistol at his feet and say "Create!" I advise Shames to tend to his own pasture.

This time it was your readers who got milked.

*Pete Meter
San Francisco, Calif.*

BACK TALK AT GIRL TALK

JUST LOVED Roberta Smoodin's piece ("What Do Single Women Really Talk About?" November). I read it in the sauna at my athletic club, where just such talk floats about freely. So humorous—yet so true and, oh, so sad!

*Sylviana Gilfillan
Lynden, Wash.*

AFTER HAVING read Roberta Smoodin's article, I suggest that Smoodin spend less time trying to find the ideal man and devote more time to finding some interesting girlfriends.

Smoodin's attitude ("When we talk about men these days, we usually categorize—out of necessity, because none of them seem to break out of the categories") and her sundae friends' shallowness combine to evoke heretofore unknown sexist feelings I apparently possess.

*John S. Harris
Santa Barbara, Calif.*

FANTASYLAND

GOOD JOB on "How the Pentagon Flies," by Frank Rose (November), and a nice trip through the corridors of Fantasyland, but the quote at the end of the article from *The*

Effects of Nuclear War did not really bring the piece to a conclusion. What should have been pointed out is that another Cuban missile crisis plus the present "launch-on-warning" strategy must, of necessity, lead directly to a nuclear war. That's where the fantasy exists. The present policies are aimed at preventing confrontation, whether or not our strategists have taken the time to think it out. The next, and final, point is the vast amount of population that lies above the equator. The object of our defense department should be to prevent, not to cause, a nuclear war.

*Marvin Gregory
Renton, Wash.*

HURRAY FOR HARRY

ANYTHING ESQUIRE contains besides Harry Stein's Ethics column is an extra. The \$2 a month can be justified solely on the basis of this insightful, sane, and even brave column. Though I'm continually fascinated by articles by or about Vladimir Nabokov, John Lennon, or Stanley Elkin, it is Stein's good solid sense that keeps me coming back.

*Corey Mesler
Memphis, Tenn.*

A GOOD YARN

READING GEOFFREY Norman's Outdoors column is like sitting down beside a fine campfire storyteller, loosening your bootlaces, and sinking into that half hypnotized state of relaxation that only a fine storyteller can produce.

*John Medelman
Menomonie, Wisc.*

ESQUIRE STRIKES OUT

YOUR BASEBALL predictions ("Prophecy," May) rank among the worst I've ever seen. Three fourth-place clubs and one fifth-place club made it into the playoffs, with the fifth-place Philadelphia Phillies taking it all!

The results couldn't have been worse if you'd pulled these teams out of a hat, but that might be a good idea for next year.

*D. C. Dowd
Toledo, Ohio*

Letters to the editor should be mailed with your address and phone number to: *The Sound and the Fury*, Esquire, 2 Park Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10016. Letters may be edited for length and clarity.