

ICON OF THE MONTH

For some, afterlife begins at 40. In the final years before he died, John Lennon was a fading star: eccentric, reclusive, his talent and his passion apparently burnt out as he devoted himself to making bread in the luxurious home he shared with his dominant wife and cute little son. He no longer seemed even vaguely hip.

His murder (some called it an assassination) changed all that. His death at the hands of a disillusioned fan transmuted even the base metal of *Double Fantasy*, his final collaboration with Yoko Ono, into platinum.

Instant karma finally got him. Weeping crowds kept vigil in Central Park, burning candles in devotion to a man who had always rejected such adulation. Everyone covered his songs. Roxy Music covered 'Jealous Guy' with sugar and got to number one.

The iconoclast who had demolished his own myth as enthusiastically as anyone else's was suddenly turned back into an icon. The words on the frame declared that he gave his life for the cause of peace, love and domestic bliss.

It was all so much bullshit – and the irony was that Lennon had always been the enemy of pretence. For all his espousal of love in the Sixties and peace in the Seventies, the principle he really stood for was truth.

The fact that he pursued it down so many dead ends, from rock'n'roll to LSD to Transcendental Meditation to the avant-garde to heroin to primal screaming to radical politics to who

knows what else, did not lessen his desire to be real. He believed in a hundred and one different things, but he was always a believer in truth.

Not that the truth of him was ever easy to get at. The other dead gods of popular culture – Marilyn, Jimi, Elvis,



BOB GRUEN

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Diana – have all become so familiar to us: we know them by their first names and a handful of 'typical' images. Lennon remains a stranger, elusive for all his honesty.

He had a complex personality, that early bereavement, unprecedented fame and huge quantities of alcohol, speed,

cannabis, acid and heroin flexed and twisted into a dozen contradictory shapes – to all of which his songwriting gave a voice.

Perhaps this is one reason for his enduring popularity: there is a Lennon for every taste. When Liam Gallagher prostrated himself on stage before a vast back-projection of him a few years ago, the question that springs to mind is not so much 'Why?' as 'Which?'

Was it the man who wrote 'Girl' or the one who wrote 'God'? The poet, the peacenik or the wit, the cynic or the sentimentalist, the idealist, the realist, the surrealist, the lover of the Goons or the lover of Yoko, the drunk or the health freak, the innocent or the bully, the Liverpudlian, the New Yorker or the ambassador of Nutopia? Was it the Walrus or Dr Winston O'Boogie?

Pop culture has produced other quick-change artists, from David Bowie to Madonna, but with Lennon each mutation was real: not a manipulation of image but an expression of himself.

The most powerful lines he wrote were generally the most personal. 'I just believe in me/Yoko and me/That's reality,' he sang in a still, small voice on the untitled Plastic Ono Band album.

We may say we believe in something rather bigger, but faith without honesty is a fraud. In the end, his big statements about love and peace have passed away; but Lennon's commitment to truth abides, an inspiration and a challenge in a resolutely superficial world. **Huw Spanner**