

This Day in History... December 8, 1980

Death of John Lennon

On December 8, 1980, John Lennon was killed outside his home in New York City. A musical pioneer, Lennon and his former bandmates the Beatles had introduced millions of people to the new sound and attitude of rock 'n' roll.

John Winston Lennon was born on October 9, 1940, in Liverpool, England, during a German bombing raid. Lennon rarely saw his father, a sea merchant who was often away for extended periods. His mother struggled to raise him on her own, so he spent much of his childhood living with his aunt Mimi. Because of this, Lennon rarely acknowledged the authority of his friends' parents, and was known for his rebellious streak. At school, Lennon was the class clown and "on the road to failure," according to one teacher. However, he enjoyed art and produced his own school magazine, *The Daily Howl*. Outside of school, he expanded his world view through stamp collecting.

Lennon had a love of music from an early age and started his first band, the Quarrymen, when he was 15. By the time he was 18, he wrote his first song, "Hello Little Girl." Despite his dreams of becoming a musician, Lennon went to art school, but was kicked out before his final year. Over the next few years, Lennon met Paul McCartney, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr, and they became The Beatles in 1960.

In 1962, Brian Epstein became the group's manager and arranged a recording session. At that first session in the studio, The Beatles recorded an entire album in less than 10 hours, despite Lennon suffering from a severe cold. Called *Please Please Me*, the album was a big hit in Great Britain. *Please Please Me* also led to an invitation to appear on *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

Lennon and McCartney quickly became one of the most successful songwriting teams in history, penning about 180 songs together – most of The Beatles's catalog. By 1963, Beatlemania had consumed the UK, and a year later, The Beatles invaded America. The Beatles recorded 22 number one hits from 1963 to 1969. In an eight-year run, the band released thirteen albums. The Beatles are widely credited with revolutionizing the sound and style of rock 'n' roll music and pushing the boundaries of musical creativity.

Lennon soon became disillusioned with live performances. He worried no one could hear the music over the screaming fans. In 1966, they stopped touring and focused on writing, recording, and making movies. Amid artistic differences, The Beatles embarked on solo projects and parted ways in 1970. Though their friendships were strained, Lennon would later say "I still love those guys. The Beatles are over, but John, Paul, George, and Ringo go on."



Beatles stamp from the Celebrate the Century Series

After the split Lennon collaborated with his wife Yoko Ono, and together they took up a number of activist causes. Most notably, they opposed the Vietnam War and held a "Bed-In for Peace" in protest. Lennon then recorded "Give Peace a Chance," which became an anti-war anthem. Two years later, he released "Imagine," another anti-war song and his most famous release after leaving the Beatles.

Lennon's activism worried President Nixon, who feared the anti-war activities could cost him reelection. So he had the FBI follow Lennon and attempted to have him deported. After Nixon resigned, the deportation order was overturned, and Lennon received a green card.

After taking a five year hiatus to raise his son Sean, Lennon returned to music in 1980. His final album reflected the contentment he found in his stable family life. Then, on December 8, 1980, his life was cut short by an unstable fan, Mark David Chapman. Chapman had been a Beatles fan, but grew angry at Lennon for his lavish lifestyle. Chapman was inspired by Holden Caulfield from *The Catcher in the Rye* to kill "phonies." Lennon had signed a copy of his album *Double Fantasy* for Chapman hours earlier. Memorials were then held across the globe as the world said goodbye to one of the most influential musicians ever known.

Over the course of his 23-year career, Lennon had 25 number one singles in the US. Fittingly, Lennon received a number of honors, including his posthumous induction into the Songwriters and Rock 'n' Roll Halls of Fame. Today, he is remembered as a rock icon and one of the greatest singers of all time.



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