

# IT'S NOT TOO BAD

by Chris Slater

Juan Carrión, an 89-year-old schoolteacher from Cartagena, Spain, was seated on the front row at the 2014 Goya film awards in Madrid, to see a film based on his life in the mid 60s, 'Vivir es Fácil', sweep the board to win six of the seven categories for which it was nominated. The director, David Trueba, quite rightly gave him one of the awards to take back to his school. The humble star of the night had never intended telling his story. It all came down to a chance meeting, and what's more fantastic is that Trueba's film adaption isn't nearly as good as the true story of when Juan met John.

I am sat with my friend Adolfo Iglesias, a local journalist. He is laughing at an English term I had just used. "Gastro-pub?" he repeats, with a look of complete absurdity, "In Almeria every place is a gastro-pub. Nobody would ever say something that stupid."

He orders a couple of cana's of the local beer. We are in a blue tiled bar in the old town of Almeria. It's buzzing with locals, immaculately turned out in long evening dresses or merino sweaters and starched collars, their deep tan and Moorish features seem quite particular to this forgotten corner of Andalusia.

I was here to discuss his new book which was based around the six week period John Lennon had spent in Almeria in autumn 1966, whilst acting in the movie "How I Won The War". It had been a fascinating day, Adolfo being the leading expert on this neglected period of Beatle history, had given me the full tour of the city and had taken me up to the villa of Santa Isabel. This was the lost villa where John and wife Cynthia spent much of their time between filming, and a location, which Adolfo theorizes, was instrumental in the composition of 'Strawberry Fields Forever'. That afternoon we had been stood on the balcony outside of Lennon's old bedroom, where he explained exactly why he believes this.

"Until I discovered this house, not any researcher in the world gave reasonable explanation why John Lennon recalled Strawberry Field in a place like Almeria. Sun, beach, desert...all very different to Liverpool. But listen to this..."

What started as unnoticeable background ambience, swelled as my hearing re-adjusted into a mesh of sounds, bird song, faint yelps and hoots, a rolling psychedelic echo of the kids in a nearby playground, it almost double tracked itself then spooled backwards and reverberated swami-like in concentric rippling circles. I felt the warm sun on my face, a slight breeze, heard busy insects and faint footsteps in the gardens. It was the very essence of English summer.

I completely understood what Adolfo meant. If this is what Lennon heard back in '66, stoned, bored, confused - then I can realize where his childlike reminiscing came from. It was a fine moment, something I knew few people outside of Almeria had enjoyed, a direct connection to one of the finest musical masterpieces of the last century.

Back in the bar that night Adolfo begins, "What I have talked with you so far today is only half of my book, the other half is about Juan."

"When I was looking for Santa Isabel, I spent time talking with everyone of a certain age in Almeria. Everyone has a story about Lennon around here, but most of them are lies. I walked the streets on the weekends, looking for clues. I had some photographs with me from newspapers and magazines, and one photo especially had me obsessed. It's a picture of John sat on the beach, and he seems to me, tired and lost. In front of him a young blond boy, maybe 8 years old, stands tall and proud and confident. Staring at John, almost like a bully. I wonder who this boy is,

how in a picture with John he can possibly be the dominant person, so strong is his presence. So one day I am taking it around the streets, and an old lady say to me, well I don't know who this boy is, but you should go and see Señor Carrion in Cartagena, he is the Beatles man."

"I never heard of this chap, so I begin my search for him. This was the thing that changed everything. This changed my life and Mr. Carrions."

Adolfo has me absorbed, like all good storytellers do, especially ones in bars.

"I am in Cartagena, and I am walking the streets asking for him, as this is the Spanish way to detect things. It doesn't take long, they tell me he is a schoolteacher and he loves The Beatles, and his school is close. I figure he must be 80, how he is still a teacher? Eventually I get a number and call the school. He answers...but he doesn't want to talk to me. He says thank you but he is busy. It takes me two years persistence before he calls back, ready to tell his story, I thank god he did."

After I hear the story in the bar I beg to meet this man for myself, Adolfo makes a phone call and early the next morning I am on the road to Cartagena.

The tennis club was the arranged rendezvous. I am early and sit and have some breakfast when I see Señor Carrion shuffle in, his eyes adjusting to the stark change in light. The staff make a fuss of him and point him towards me. He gets up close so he can see me and I catch the scent of a wise old man, his voice is rasp and goes dry occasionally, but he talks continuously for the next few hours.

"I am a simple teacher Christopher, a simple English teacher first and foremost. My most important commitment of my whole life has been to be the best teacher I can to my pupils. I have never married, the only woman I ever loved, didn't love me back. Its okay, but I could never love anyone else. I live above the school, did Adolfo tell you I am still teaching?"  
I asked him when he first heard The Beatles. He smiles and clears his throat.

"It was Radio Luxembourg, it was 'Yesterday'. I couldn't believe it. It was the most beautiful song. I called in my fellow teacher and together we tried to interpret the words into Spanish. We started listening to the radio all the time, waiting for Beatles songs to translate the lyrics. Then we started to take the songs and play them in classes and teach the children English through Beatles songs"

This is during General Franco's austere Spain in 1965. Such pioneering, multi-media teaching techniques would have been an abstract concept at the time, but his classes grew, the school got busier and the results were astounding. He became a local legend.

"We were having some problems translating all the lyrics, it was very difficult to translate from a vinyl record, and when REVOLVER came out the words had become much harder to understand. Then I heard that John Lennon was in Almeria making a film. So I decided to go and see him to get my lyrics translated and for him to tell me all the missing words."

Fantastic. This wasn't a pursuit to meet an idol; this was the actions of a teacher who felt he was doing his students a disservice by not translating correctly. I loved his simple logic, 'well if I can't understand the words the best person to ask would be the songwriter, surely?'

He told me he kept a diary of the week he spent searching for John but it was back at his school, so we walked across the park on a perfect afternoon whilst he continued his story.

"I think the most important thing of The Beatles is the lyrics. They make you think these situations can happen to you or maybe, it's something that has already happened to you, but it's the lyrics that make you think."

The school is darkly lit. I can faintly hear a class of young kids reciting the words to 'Help!' in broken English. Juan dusts off his 1966 diary and begins to read me the hilarious week he spent trying to get to John Lennon and the endless obstacles he encountered. Eventually, with the help

of Lennon's chauffeur Alf Bicknell, Juan Carrions scribbled attempts at transcribing Beatle song lyrics, somehow make it into the hands of the original songwriter. Juan waits, with little hope of a reply.

Incredibly the word comes back, John wants to meet him. "I was so nervous!! I knocked on the door and his wife Cynthia answered, and she sent me to another place where John was hiding. I knock on the door and there is John Lennon and he just says "You're Late!" and starts laughing. This put me at ease straight away, and I went to play beach-ball with him and Michael Crawford".

From what I can gather from the diary and what Juan tells me, Lennon was both amused and impressed by the teacher's tenacity. He had personally corrected all of Juan's papers in coloured pens and rewritten entire passages where necessary. He even corrected Paul and George's songs. Juan proudly pulled out all of the sheets from his little folder. He has kept these unique historical manuscripts hidden for nearly 50 years, in a school teacher's bedroom in Cartagena.

Juan told me that John Lennon made him three promises that day on the beach. Firstly, he would have the entire Beatles back catalogue of sheet music sent to his school, which was indeed duly dispatched, with a note 'as requested by John Lennon' from Dick James Publishing.

Secondly, he would include the printed lyrics on the next Beatles album.

The next Beatles single was 'Strawberry Fields Forever', which was of course penned in Almeria, but the next album was SGT. PEPPERS LONELY HEARTS CLUB BAND and as promised on the back sleeve, were the printed lyrics for each song.

Lennon must have realised that Juan was one of many people all over the world struggling with translation; such was the Beatles global reach. It's too much of a coincidence to not believe Juan's story, especially with the evidence he has kept all these years.

The third promise was that Lennon would one day visit his school, and because he had come good on his previous two promises, Juan truly believed that one day he would. I noticed that Juan had kept several cuttings from newspapers from that horrific day in December 1980, but Adolfo had warned me not to talk about it with Juan, it still upsets him too much to discuss, although Juan did tell me that he does speak to John every Sunday at church.

The full story of Adolfo's incredible discovery of Santa Isabel and Juan Carrion were published in his book 'Juan & John' in 2013. An accompanying article in a national Spanish newspaper attracted the attention of director David Trueba. His film interpretation of the meeting of Juan and John has been a runaway success at the Spanish box office and the English subtitled version is due for release very soon. It is a fictionalised road movie, based around a Spanish school teachers search for John Lennon and has since been nominated in the 2015 foreign language category at the Oscars. Without Adolfo, the true story of Lennon's time in Almeria and the tale of Juan & John would never have been known, and the upcoming film would never have been made. Meanwhile Adolfo has bigger plans of his own. He hopes to twin the cities of Liverpool and Almeria in 2016, for the 50th Anniversary of Lennon's time in Spain and the composition of 'Strawberry Fields Forever'. It's a mammoth task but not one that's out of reach - the journalist has already successfully petitioned his local 'junta' to get a bronze statue of Lennon erected in his small plaza in Almeria.

I had no idea of the significance of this little Spanish city in Lennon's life. It is also worthy of note that the cropped hair and national health glasses which became synonymous with the shedding of Beatlemania too happened in this period, and for all these things, Almeria in Spain should be on every Beatle fans bucket list.

*Juan & John is available on [www.amazon.co.uk/Juan-John-Javier-Adolfo-Iglesias/dp/8490507473](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Juan-John-Javier-Adolfo-Iglesias/dp/8490507473)  
[www.facebook.com/viviresfacillapelicula](http://www.facebook.com/viviresfacillapelicula) - Follow Chris Slater here: [www.theres-a-place.com](http://www.theres-a-place.com)*

Kenwood,  
Weybridge,  
Surrey.  
Dec. 5th.

Dear Senor Carrion,

Thank you for your letter. I am enclosing our  
new record, which I hope you will like. And please  
don't mention money-it is a pleasure to send you our  
work.

With best wishes,

John Lennon



Adolfo Iglesias outside Santa Isabel

Chris Slater in the bathroom of Santa Isabel where due to acoustics many of the demos for Strawberry Fields Forever were recorded. The songs final lyrics are printed in the tub!



## DICK JAMES MUSIC LIMITED

with compliments

3rd April, 1967.

Please find enclosed copies of Strawberry Fields Forever  
and Penny Lane as requested by John Lennon. We shall be  
forwarding you the words of songs as they are released.

Yours sincerely,

Bennett

es House 71-75 New Oxford Street London WC1

telephone Temple Bar 4644 (5 lines)  
cable Deamus, London, WC1



*Chris Slater and the John Lennon statue in Almeria*



Good Luck  
with the English!  
Sohnemann.