

YOU SAY YOU WANT A REVOLUTION - OR DO YOU?

The Politics of John Lennon

PART SIX, 1971

Since his interview with Tariq Ali and Robin Blackburn in January 1971, John Lennon was a regular reader of their leftist publication, *Red Mole*. In February, *Red Mole* reported on the seven-week UK postal workers' strike, with in depth coverage of their struggles for better pay and working conditions. In an age in which the post was essential for business communication, this strike was detrimental to the smooth running of the country. Private postal services sprang up to mitigate the effects and to support the strikers. Anthony Mathews, a designer and art curator, set up *Culture*Carriers, Stamp*Out*Art* and called for artists to design postage stamps for the private services. Along with artists such as David Hockney and Richard Hamilton ('designer' of the *White Album*), John sent in his stamp design of a fist (Power to the People) which was to be executed in red on a black ground.



Throughout the first half of the year, *Red Mole* reported on the struggles of the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders consortium (UCS) who were facing redundancies due to falling orders for new ships. The company was in private hands and, according to the various Left publications, was mismanaged and focussed on shareholder profits. There were calls to nationalise the industry but the new Tory government under Ted Heath wasn't willing to enter into discussions. In June the UCS went into receivership. Instead of striking, 3000 workers refused to take redundancies and went on a 'work-in', aiming to complete the contracts already started and demonstrating their eagerness to work. Their unions were behind them but, because they voluntarily forsook their redundancies, the workers were not eligible for union benefits. A call went out nationwide for donations to support the workers and their families. John and Yoko Lennon were two of the many thousands who contributed.



UCS Protests against redundancies



Cover note for John and Yoko's contribution

Initially, they sent a parcel of roses which seems pointless on the surface. However, a recent report states that the flowers ended up on the maternity ward at Southern General Hospital in the Govan district of Glasgow and had a huge impact on patient well-being. The Lennons then sent £1000, just under £7000 in today's money. Unfortunately, the work-in collapsed. The irony of this sad situation is that the government, both Labour and Conservative, sought to discredit the workers by denouncing their union officials as members of the Communist Party (the Cold War was still going on). After the closures, the private owners fulfilled the remaining contracts by outsourcing to Eastern Europe, part of the Communist Bloc.

Meanwhile, several major events led by American 'radicals' had been covered by the press and television services in the UK. These events were avidly followed by British counter-culturists and leftists, including John and Yoko.

Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman were active in the US west and east coast counter-culture movements and in protests against the Vietnam war and American capitalism and imperialism. They adopted the tactics of 'guerrilla theatre' - humorous protest acts highlighting the actions of oppressive, corrupt governments and capitalist organisations. In August 1967 they released hundreds of dollar bills from the upper public galleries of the New York Stock Exchange, bringing trading to a halt as the already well-paid brokers scrambled to grab the cash. This event was a direct influence on the 'Free Money' scene in *The Magic Christian*, starring Peter Sellers and Ringo Starr. The film was released in 1969 but was based on the 1959 novel by Terry Southern. That scene was not in the book.

On New Years' Eve 1967 Rubin and Hoffman founded the Yippies (Youth International Party) and began a guerrilla theatre campaign which culminated in protests, along with other radical activist groups, at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in August 1968. Terry Southern was covering the event for *Esquire* magazine and he brought along a photographer, Michael Cooper, who had shot the *Sgt Pepper* album cover the previous year. The brutality of the Chicago police force against the protestors was broadcast on television in the US and in the UK – “the world is watching”. Seven of the so-called conspirators, including Rubin and Hoffman, were brought to trial in 1969 which carried on into 1970. This too was televised widely, and John and Yoko followed it.



The Magic Christian, bankers and Free Money

David Frost invited Jerry Rubin to appear on his UK television programme, broadcast live on 8 November 1970. Rubin appeared with his colleague Stew Albert and the British activist Brian Flanagan who arranged to have counter-culturists in the studio audience. The idea was to have a ‘serious’ discussion for the first 30 minutes and then let the ‘hippies’ take over the programme. John later congratulated Rubin for daring to smoke a joint on live television.

As far as we know, the Lennons had no direct contact with Rubin and Hoffman until they moved to New York City in August. However, in April and May of that year, Abbie Hoffman announced that John



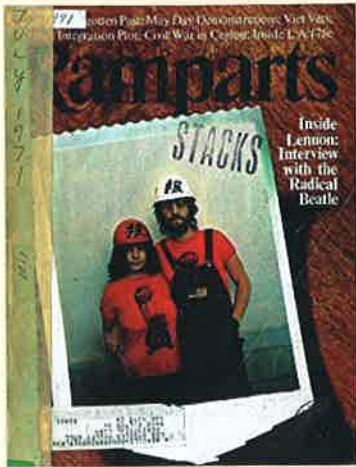
David Frost with Jerry Rubin, Brian Flanagan and Stew Albert

Lennon and Yoko Ono had contributed a 30-minute tape to his cause to bring music and information to the American combatants serving in Vietnam. Abbie Hoffman had set up the radio station WPAX in the US (‘pax’ = peace) and, advertising in the *Youth International Party Line* newspaper, called for musicians to submit a 30-minute cassette tape. The idea was that these tapes would be shared with “our people serving in Nam”.

As the war progressed from the mid-1960s onwards, more and more measures were being undertaken by protestors to get messages across to the US forces in the field. Anyone who has seen the film *Good Morning Vietnam*, based on a true story, will understand the power of music broadcast through radio. The official radio stations that US soldiers had access to in Vietnam were Armed Forces Radio and *Radio Luxembourg*. But, like in Britain, there were also pirate stations. The most notable was *Radio First Termer* which played hard rock, much of which at the time was expressing dissatisfaction with the global capitalist and imperialist policies of the American government. The idea was to get the message across that perhaps, just perhaps, this was not a ‘just war’. We don’t know if Abbie Hoffman’s tapes (or John and Yoko’s) ever made it to *Radio First Termer* or other pirate and foreign stations, such as Radio Hanoi, which broadcast out of North Vietnam to the US troops. Nevertheless, Vice President Spiro Agnew (resigned in 1973 on charges of corruption) was worried enough to brand Abbie Hoffman ‘Hanoi Hannah’ after the North Vietnamese propaganda DJ.



Michael Cooper – protestors, Chicago. Terry Southern front right



John and Yoko left England for the United States in August 1971. Initially, they intended to remain only for short stays – to continue the search for Yoko’s daughter and to finish off the *Imagine* album. The contacts they made and their subsequent activities kept them in New York City. The American Left had prepared the way for their arrival. Counter-culture and ‘radical’ publications reprinted John’s interview for *Red Mole* from earlier in the year. One in particular, *Ramparts*, retitled the interview: ‘Lennon: The Working-class Hero Turns Red’.

Ramparts July 1971

It didn’t take long for John and Yoko to connect with a variety of interesting characters after they moved to Greenwich Village. One of these was the self-professed ‘garbologist’ A.J. Weberman. Weberman has been called many things but, succinctly, he is a Bob Dylan fanatic. Weberman’s fascination with Dylan went as far as rifling through his garbage and analysing his lifestyle from it, even to the extent of teaching courses on it. In 1969 Weberman set up the ‘Rock Liberation Front’, a movement to bring Dylan back into the political field. Many people felt at that time that Bob Dylan was a protest singer who had lost his way and needed to be reminded of his ‘duty’ to write songs disclaiming the Vietnam War, racism and gross capitalism, all ills facing American society. John ‘signed up’ and proudly sported his ‘Free Bob Dylan’ badge, courtesy of A.J. Weberman.



Weberman posing in a skip



Free Bob Dylan

John must have felt strongly at this time that rock artists had a duty to speak out through their music against injustices. This will be the reason Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman arranged to meet the Lennons in September.

Terry Bloxham (Power to the People)