John Lennon: The Life by Philip Norman

Dont Let Me Down

For more than a quarter century, Philip Normans internationally bestselling Shout! has been unchallenged as the definitive biography of the Beatles. Now, at last, Norman turns his formidable talent to the Beatle for whom belonging to the worlds most beloved pop group was never enough. Drawing on previously untapped sources, and with unprecedented access to all the major characters, here is the comprehensive and most revealing portrait of John Lennon that is ever likely to be published.

This masterly biography takes a fresh and penetrating look at every aspect of Lennons much-chronicled life, including the songs that have turned him, posthumously, into a near-secular saint. In three years of research, Norman has turned up an extraordinary amount of new information about even the best-known episodes of Lennon folklore—his upbringing by his strict Aunt Mimi; his allegedly wasted school and student days; the evolution of his peerless creative partnership with Paul McCartney; his Beatle-busting love affair with a Japanese performance artist; his forays into painting and literature; his experiments with Transcendental Meditation, primal scream therapy, and drugs. The books numerous key informants and interviewees include Sir Paul McCartney, Sir George Martin, Sean Lennon—whose moving reminiscence reveals his father as never before—and Yoko Ono, who speaks with sometimes shocking candor about the inner workings of her marriage to John.

Honest and unflinching, as John himself would wish, Norman gives us the whole man in all his endless contradictions—tough and cynical, hilariously funny but also naive, vulnerable and insecure—and reveals how the mother who gave him away as a toddler haunted his mind and his music for the rest of his days.

John Lennon: The Life by Philip Norman is the finest biography of John Lennon yet written. This is so for several reasons. Chief among them is Normans fluid prose. He writes so beautifully that a book of 800-plus pages floats pleasantly by like a lazy summer day. Norman is also fair, giving the reader an unbiased look at the strengths and foibles of one of the greatest songwriters of the 20th Century. Norman digs deep, providing the most comprehensive study of Lennon to date, especially of his youth.
In the end, we get a real sense of the man, something that was lacking in previous biographies.

Still, there are imperfections. Norman simply does not deal with some of the controversies in Lennons life. Norman does a thorough examination of Lennons autobiographical song, In My Life. But this study focuses only on the lyrics. Nothing is mentioned of Paul McCartneys claim to have written the melody, or of Lennons counter-claim that the song was his alone. Fred Seaman is mentioned as having been personal assistant to Lennon during the latters final months. But the claim in Seaman’s book, The Last Days of John Lennon, that Yoko Ono was planning to dump John receives no mention. Seaman claimed Yoko was moving Johns stuff out of their apartment in the summer of 1980 until she discovered that John was returning to the studio. Then she did an about face. Seaman says this prompted the song Im Losing You, the most gritty and honest on the last album Lennon released. The incident, whether true or not, deserves mention, and more. I wanted to see Norman examine the evidence and reach some kind of conclusion. It was a let down that these controversies were ignored. Norman also says that John plays lead guitar on Cold Turkey. Any Beatles fan worth his salt knows that thats Eric Clapton laying down those filthy riffs.

Nonetheless, John Lennon: The Life is an excellent biography in every other way.

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