

Yoko Ono will always be an enigma to those who don't know her. And few do. I quickly learned that getting her to agree to an exclusive interview was the easy part. Getting personal would prove to be more formidable.

She is extraordinarily private. Yet, she opened the door to questions—carte blanche. She is painfully shy. Yet, with little prompting, confessed her basic desires for John Lennon from the day they first met. Her explanations were often cryptic, perhaps understandable in light of her background and the social upheaval of the '60s.

And so, tape recorder rolling, pen in hand, we began our talk. At the end of the interview I realized that throughout her life, Yoko has always known where she stood.

YOKONOMICS



JAYNE WEXLER

The story of Yoko's childhood could have been lifted from the pages of Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club*, a gripping depiction of Eastern values and matriarchal family struggle. Add extreme wealth and an absentee father to the drama, and you have the makings of a prime-time mini-series.

It will be like old home week when Yoko Ono returns to Palm Beach in December for her much-touted art exhibit on Worth Avenue, where her paintings and sculpture will join late husband John Lennon's artistry. But unlike past visits, there is no ocean-side home to visit or husband with whom to share the journey. Yoko is on her own and well out of the limelight she occupied during the '60s, '70s and '80s when the couple led an entire generation across an uncharted landscape of social change.

Yoko emerged on the pop culture scene by way of mortal-turned-Beatle-turned-immortal John Lennon. The petite, then-30-something fledgling avant garde artist was busy searching for bliss—and the perfect high. She found them both when she met John at a gallery opening in 1966. They were married two years later.

For most of us, that is when her life began. The anonymous Japanese woman on John's arm stepped from obscurity into celebrity. Ironically, no one really ever knew who she was. Even now, her life is characterized by the events with which she is associated.

It is all the more ironic that she became the fall guy—the one who was quietly (and not-so-quietly) blamed for the Beatles' breakup.

Now at age 61, her quest for creative nirvana burns hotter than ever. Her hair, bobbed fashionably short, reveals the splendid details of her face.

Born February 18, 1933 in Tokyo, the story of Yoko's childhood could have been lifted from the pages of Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club*, a gripping depiction of Eastern values and matriarchal family struggle. Add extreme wealth and an absentee father to the drama and you have the makings of a prime-time mini-series.

"As a child I was under invisible but enormous pressure," she confesses, as if relieved all over again to voice a long-unspoken truth. "My parents were perfectionists. As a result, I could never be enough. That is when my

rebellion began, although it was more about surviving the *struggle* of trying to please them. They just wanted me to achieve—something, anything. I was just trying to find my own way.

"Yes, I began life with a silver spoon in my mouth. My mother's family was quite wealthy—they owned many things...banks and such. My father worked at one of them. His position took him to San Francisco before I was born. I didn't meet him until I was two years old, when we joined him there. In 1953, we (Yoko and two younger siblings) moved to Scarsdale, New York, after having made several other moves."

Yoko enrolled at Sarah Lawrence College and studied music composition and poetry there for three years. "I was like most of the other kids there: you rebel against the establishment but you don't mind using their money. So that is what I did. Inside, I never fooled myself, though."

Yoko entered the avant-garde art scene at a crucial time in the early '60s when traditional art forms were being challenged. Dancers, painters, sculptors, musicians, poets and filmmakers banded together, often with multi-media results. One such group—informally dubbed The Chambers

Street Series—was formed, in which various art forms were performed or displayed. Encouraged and inspired by this new-found outlet, Yoko exhibited some of her paintings at the AG Gallery on Madison Avenue, which Lithuanian emigré and artist George Maciunas had opened. Maciunas saw Yoko's (and the others') works as the embodiment of a virtually endless array of mediums from which an artist can draw. He named them 'Fluxus' artists and in so doing gave title to an art movement that typified that era. Says Yoko, "I remember seeing a collage created from egg cartons and thinking, 'What an extraordinary way to look at otherwise ordinary objects.' I still

RUUD HOFF



What has been my most significant high?

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belong to that way of creating.”

In 1962 Yoko married American artist Tony Cox and together they had a daughter, Kylko, now 31.

Later that year she “performed” at Carnegie Recital Hall for the first time. Many of these performances incorporated the matter-of-fact, task-oriented activities that had become a Fluxus trademark: Placing a clock on the stage, Yoko asked the audience to wait until the alarm sounded. In another performance, she sat passively on the stage while members of the audience came forward and cut off pieces of her clothing until she was nearly naked. Extremist avant-garde, some called it. Others saw it as a creative social commentary. To Yoko, it was just

the beginning of a much larger work.

A pre-opening gallery party in 1966—where she first met John—set the stage for her next level of creativity. “When I first saw John I thought, ‘What an attractive guy!’ But I dismissed the thought because I was married, and in love, and had a family. In retrospect, I don’t think either one of us knew what that moment would one day grow into.”

In 1968, during one of John’s exhibits, the two met again, only this time John had divorced his wife, Cynthia Powell. Yoko had divorced as well and the following year the couple married.

Disenchanted with Yoko’s new-found path, Cox kidnapped the couple’s seven-year-old daughter and disappeared.

“Initially it was extremely difficult to go on with my life,” recalls Yoko. “Don’t Worry, Kylko, both a tribute and an appeal, was written and performed by me that year.

“I think there are many reasons why she has never contacted me. At that time, my actions—my association with a rock and roller—were not considered, shall we say, favorable.”

In 1969 Yoko and John staged their Bed-in For Peace in Amsterdam and Montreal. They indulged the media’s appetite while publicizing their pitch for world peace. “Whatever we did in those days became world news: shopping, driving, etc. We decided to do something for the world instead of showing John and Yoko shopping again. Filmmaker Peter Watkins asked us to make a statement and we did. The point was to show that we each make our own beds—chart our own destiny.”

Next came the couple’s adventure in film. Yoko has more than a dozen credits to her name, including the legendary *Imagine* (1971), a full-length collaborative effort with John about the couple’s music and lifestyle. The couple’s recording credits include: *Wedding Album* (1969), *Yoko Ono Plastic Ono Band* (1970), and *Double Fantasy* (1980), which won a Grammy for Album of the Year in 1981.

“I was always looking for the highs—the real highs that come from true inspiration. A high for me is to

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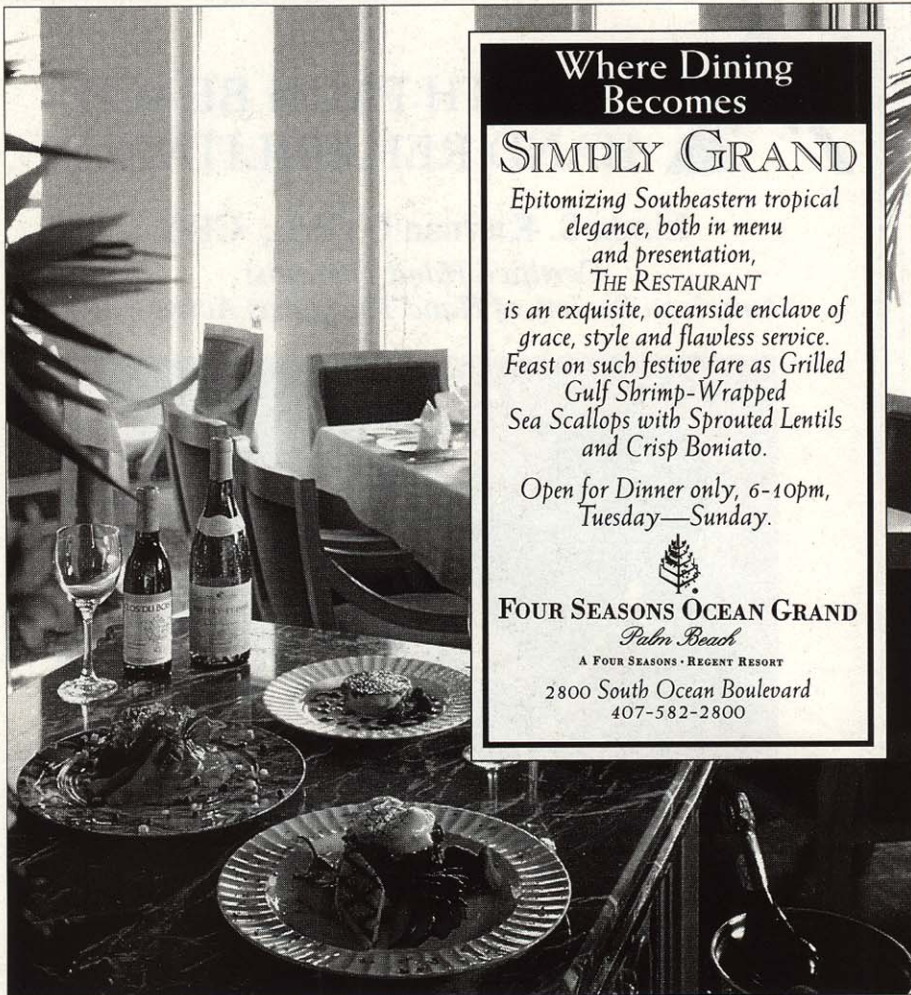
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Continued on page 96



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Yoko Ono continued from page 36

take that inspiration and create something as a result of it. What has been my most significant high? John, of course—and creating things together. We understood each other, inspired one another. As for the breakup of the Beatles, John felt that it was time to pursue things on his own. Even in 1980, while John was still here, we were thinking of making the rounds again. Not with a bed-in or that form of expression. We were going to tour the *Double Fantasy* album, which we had finished earlier that year. But everything changed in the fall when John was murdered. I just wanted to isolate. I gave up the (Palm Beach) house and retreated here to our New York apartment (the Dakota) where I live today.

“In a way, all that I have done since then has been a part of him. The first 10 years I intentionally tried to do a lot to satisfy his fans—to promote his work, make it available. It was my way of honoring him. After that, I felt I could do my work as well.”

In 1985 Yoko dedicated Strawberry Fields, a triangular island garden of peace in New York’s Central Park, to John. “It is where we took our last walk together. John would have preferred this over a statue or monument.”

Three years later, Yoko staged her first solo exhibit, *Yoko Ono: Three Events*, at Missouri University’s Gallery. The biggies soon followed. The following year she was approached by the Whitney Museum to display her work as part of a group exhibit. For the first time Yoko was being recognized apart from John. Her work has since been displayed throughout the world—including her native Tokyo.

“I don’t think that their (the Whitney’s) request had anything to do with John. I had earned my place by then. If they wanted to hype that I was John’s widow it would have made more sense to approach me in

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