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# REVIEW: 'SMITH TAPES: I'M NOT THE BEATLES: JOHN & YOKO INTERVIEWS 1969-72'

Posted by: Wesley Britton April 21, 2014  
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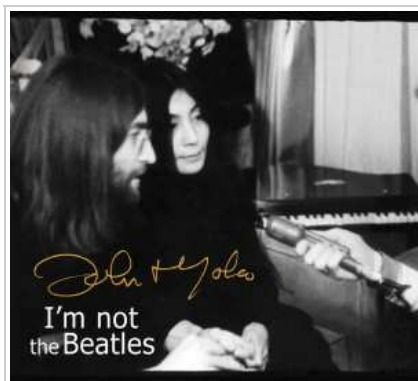
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After all these years and all the books and documentaries exploring the life and legacy of John Lennon, you'd think there can't be any new revelations to be made. You might also think a package of eight CDs containing five in-depth conversations between John and Yoko and radio personality Howard Smith would merely be another means to squeeze more nickels out of the Lennon cashbox.

However, no matter how well informed you are about John and Yoko's adventures during the transformative period of 1969 through 1972, there's something special hearing the pair discussing a myriad of topics taped between the time John was still a Beatle and his days playing with Elephant's Memory. Remember, from May 28-29, 1969—the dates of Smith's first conversations with the couple—to January 23, 1972, John and Yoko moved from Bed-Ins and avant-garde films to Primal Scream therapy and the Plastic Ono Band to just beginning to think about settling permanently in New York City.

I'm Not the Beatles: The John & Yoko Interviews is the latest package of audio recordings Smith conducted with a host of rock stars during this period. Originally aired in edited form one time only on Smith's weekly Wplj-Fm radio broadcasts in New York, alongside John and Yoko, Smith talked with other luminaries like Andy Warhol, Mick Jagger, and Frank Zappa. Buried in the back of his West Village loft for 40 years, all these conversations are now collectively dubbed "The Smith Tapes" and many have been released in monthly installments via iTunes and Amazon Mp3. Last year, a Grammy nominated Limited Edition Box Set of these tapes included two of the John and Yoko interviews, but I'm Not the Beatles: The John & Yoko Interviews is the first time all the Lennon tapes have been available on CD together.



In whatever format you prefer, these uncut interviews now sound very much like artifacts of a time and place with no editing to destroy the "you are there" feel. For example, while the Lennon/Ono tapes were mastered to provide high quality sound, we hear the banter before and after the conversations, the sounds of Smith changing tapes, and the noises of everyone eating as the Lencons and Smith really touch all the bases. It's as if the listener gets to participate in the discovery of a long lost rock and roll treasure.

Throughout the 540 minutes, it's clear John and Yoko enjoy Smith's company, even when he challenges them on just how useful the "selling" of peace is in terms of actually saving human lives and what the meaning of Woodstock really was. I admit forgetting or never hearing some of the matters that came up. For example, while describing the premiere of Ringo Starr's Magic Christian, Lennon says he attended

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showing posters of a hanged Indian activist. I didn't know the Lennons wanted to do a July 1969 Peace Festival in Montreal with the world's largest bed that they wanted to take to Russia. I knew they, at that time, preferred the benefits of the macrobiotic diet, but I hadn't read about their fear of government sanctioned foods. Other listeners may be surprised by similar discussions touching on matters either forgotten or not summarized in all the Lennon films and books they've ingested.

For Beatles fans, the Jan. 23, 1972 conversations are likely to be the most enjoyable. As it happened, John and Yoko were listening to a WPLJ Beatles marathon when Smith set up his tape recorder. Not only can listeners hear the music in the background, Lennon frequently reacts to what he's hearing. He comments on composing "Rain" and "Strawberry Fields," and gets very excited when "Happiness Is a Warm Gun" is played. He turns the song up, discusses how he put that "collage" together, and what the song was, and wasn't, about. That's the sort of moment best experienced audibly, not on the printed page.

Smith Tapes: I'm Not the Beatles: The John & Yoko Interviews probably isn't a set for the casual fan who might prefer a boiled-down "best of" selection from the tide of ideas, insights, jokes, and memories. Perhaps downloading a selection of interviews is the better way to go for the less serious aficionado. However, there should be many Lennon devotees who'd appreciate the opportunity to have John and Yoko talking about love, art, touring, the Cavern Club, Paul and Linda, the differences between British and American television, Allen Klein, hippie radicals, film making, Help!, Arthur Janov, and brown rice—more or less as if they are sitting in your own living room. Whether they're clothed or not is up to your imagination.

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