



JULIA BAIRD

Words: Fiona Collins
Interview: Andy Evans

*"HE'S NOT LENNON ANYTHING.
HE'S JOHN, MY BROTHER."*

December 2010 marked the end of the John Lennon Tribute Season in Liverpool; a commemoration of one of the city's most celebrated sons. We gain an extraordinary insight into Lennon's life with his real Liverpool family, and speak exclusively to his half-sister Julia Baird.

There is very little to say about The Beatles that hasn't already been said. A quick search online reveals more than three thousand book titles on the subject, covering everything from philosophy and politics, to children's books and history, and just about everything in between. Every facet of their lives, both as a group, and individually, has been studied, analysed, recorded, speculated upon, or, in the absence of any solid proof, just plain fabricated.

In today's celebrity-obsessed world, theirs is a story which is still able to sell front pages better than almost any other musical name in history. It has every element of a modern best-seller: rags-to-riches, intrigue, and ultimately, tragedy. The two surviving band members (George Harrison lost his battle with cancer in 2001) maintain an iconic status in the music world, while John Lennon continues to bewitch generations of music fans with his haunting lyrics. Thirty years after his shocking murder in 1980 (a decade after the group's eventual split) Lennon is still one of the world's most idolised peace ambassadors.

From October to December in 2010, the City of Liverpool commemorated Lennon's life with The John Lennon Tribute Season. Offering a diverse programme of live music, poetry and art, this celebration of one of the city's most famous sons was organised to mark what would have been Lennon's seventieth birthday.

The event attracted many thousands of his followers to the city, where Lennon is remembered as "one of the world's most influential musicians." It drew to a close on the 9th of December with an emotional charity concert at the Echo Arena on what was the thirtieth anniversary of the musician's death. Even without an event of this nature, it is estimated that almost a million people visit Liverpool each year to pay homage to the birthplace of the UK's most iconic musical exports.

While the celebration has given Beatles fans, and Lennon fans in particular, a chance to reflect on the immense contribution that both he and the group have made to modern popular culture, one household has kept a respectful distance from the festivities. "By choice, John's Liverpool family aren't really involved in it (the Tribute Season), apart from Julian and Cynthia who came to unveil the tribute memorial in the park," says Julia Baird, Lennon's half-sister, whose mother, also Julia, she credits with John's musical and artistic sensitivities.

"We were invited, but we're just not going because this is...it's a very family thing for us and we're far too close to it, and it's for the fans isn't it." Baird chooses her words carefully. "I mean, we'll go and see it (the memorial) afterwards, of course we will, but neither of us wanted to go and be there at an opening or anything like that."

Baird and her younger sister Jacqui were two of four siblings born to Julia Lennon between 1940 and 1949. John, the oldest, was the only child from Julia's brief marriage to Alfred Lennon. Victoria (later re-named Ingrid) was Julia's second child. Born after a brief affair, Ingrid was quickly put up for adoption at the insistence of Julia's family. Following Julia's separation from Alfred - although they never actually divorced - she set up home with John 'Bobby' Dykins with whom she had another two daughters, Julia Baird and Jacqui.

It's all too easy to forget that Lennon ever had a 'Liverpool family' as Julia refers to them, because of the media attention which has always been given to Lennon and his second wife Yoko Ono. John Lennon was at the height of his fame when he began his affair with Ono, whilst still married to his first wife Cynthia. According to much of what has subsequently been written, Ono held a bewitching power over Lennon, and his infatuation with the Japanese artist, together with his increasingly hedonistic lifestyle and removal to Los Angeles, led him to all but renounce his blood relatives in the UK. "We only lost John when he left the country," says Baird quietly.

The story of Baird's half-brother; the unconventional upbringing, the rise to stardom, Lennon's alienation from his

family, the untimely death of their mother, and, of course, Lennon's own murder, clearly still deeply affects Baird. The curt, but heartfelt responses she gives to some of the more personal questions, really emphasise how, behind the media circus, Lennon was still a brother and son whose choices impacted his family in the UK.

"Imagine if it was your family," Baird says, when asked how it felt to hear via the media of Lennon's latest drug or drink fuelled 'incidents' in America. "It's all very well to be an onlooker, or reading a tabloid and saying 'Oh look what he's up to now,' but it wasn't very good for us.

"John was the class clown at school – often in trouble for it, and when he became famous, rich and famous, he was the class clown on the world stage, but we couldn't sack him anymore, couldn't put him in detention anymore, you couldn't do anything with him."

To say that Baird and Lennon were close throughout their childhood, would not be to tell the whole truth however. John Lennon was just six years old, and his mother was pregnant with Julia, when Lennon was taken – controversially – from the family home to be cared for by his Aunt Mimi, who herself was unable to have children.

Despite living in separate homes, Baird is keen to dispel the myth that once John moved in with his aunt, their mother had no more constructive part in his upbringing.

"We saw him a lot," says Baird. "We shared a mother, so I don't remember a life without John. Anything that went on before I was born – I'm six and a half years younger than John – of course I don't know, well, I know about but I don't remember, but, by the time I was growing up, my mother and John were very much mother and son, and he was my brother."

Baird has recently spoken for the first time about these early years in the Lennon household, in no small part to try and dispel some of the more hurtful stories which had been propagated about her mother. Julia Lennon has often been portrayed as a frivolous and flirtatious woman, and an irresponsible parent whose bohemian nature was at odds with the upstanding post-Victorian values of her generation. Baird published her highly revealing book 'Imagine This: Growing Up With my Brother John Lennon' in 2007, and then collaborated on the screenplay of the 2010 biopic of Lennon's adolescence 'Nowhere Boy'. Both of these titles portrayed Mrs Lennon in a much more sympathetic light, and revealed something of the torment she received at the hands of her own family.

Baird is at her most unguarded when talking of her own memories of her mother.

"She was everything that John is – more so. An artist, a singer, a dancer. I mean a real artist – she could draw. A very, very talented woman...very beautiful. An unbiased opinion, there you are!" Baird laughs softly; it is the first time there has been any humour in her voice during this interview. "But everything that John did was a shadow of what my mother could do."

Just as Baird's most poignant memories of her mother are of her soft, artistic nature, rather than of any shortcomings she may have had as a model parent, so Baird's fondest memories of her brother aren't as the media portrayed him – enrapturing audience of swooning female fans, and spreading messages of love and peace from cavernous hotel beds – but instead as an artistic, fun and spirited older brother.

"I remember him before the singing, before he was playing the guitar," begins Baird. "My mother



taught him the banjo and I remember, I can see it, she taught him to jive, taught him to play the banjo, taught him to play the piano; it was all my mother. But before that, she taught him to draw, or she encouraged his skill for drawing, because she had it too – you know how it is, a gift – and my mother used to sit for hours with him drawing. "They're the things that we remember."

Baird and her sister Jacqui were present at many of Lennon's early gigs, initially when the teenager Lennon performed for friends and family with his school band The Quarrymen, and later during the embryonic days of The Beatles.

"We went to many, many concerts," remembers Baird. "From the bathroom and the kitchen at home...to the back of a coal lorry...to Mimi's porch...to Paul's bathroom – because it echoed – everywhere was tiled. After the back of the lorry, the next thing was the Woolton Garden Fete (when Lennon and McCartney first met). We were all there. And then right up to the Empire in Liverpool, the 'Hard Day's Night' premier at the Odeon in Liverpool, Finsbury Park Astoria in London. We went from the beginning."

Someone else who supported Lennon in these early days, before money and fame had intervened, was Lennon's first wife Cynthia, with whom he had a son Julian (named after Julia Lennon) in 1963. The couple divorced in 1968, following Lennon's affair with Ono, but Baird and Cynthia remain close.

"Cynthia is like a big sister, she's been kind to my sister and I [sic] from day one, and nothing stopped that. And don't forget, she knew John when he was an impoverished student three months after our mother died, when he was in high angst and low dudgeon. Cynthia was with him right through all that, and we met Cynthia almost immediately that she was with John and she hasn't changed through all that – very confident, very lovely and a very honest person."

In contrast, when Baird is asked of her relationship with Lennon's second wife

Yoko Ono, she replies quickly. "Well, I know her – we know each other, it's as simple as that, we know each other." The subject is dismissed.

One can't help but feel, although it is never explicitly said, that John Lennon's success with The Beatles, and his subsequent fame, brought as much angst and misery to his family, as it did pride and joy. Indeed, both Baird and her sister have publicly stated that they wished their brother had never picked up a guitar.

"Then we'd still have him wouldn't we," Baird says quietly.

Asked whether she still feels the same way, Baird says: "Yes – yes I do. That's what I'm saying about all this stuff going on in Liverpool. People walk round saying Lennon this, and Lennon that, and my whole being just shrivels inside. He's John – he's John to me. He's not Lennon anything. I don't want any part of Lennon. He's John, my brother."

Family is clearly more important to Baird than the trappings of fame which The Beatles brought to their small household, and one of the greatest tragedies of the Baird/Lennon story is how their close-knit – if unconventional – family life unravelled following the death of Julia Lennon in July 1958, when she was fatally struck by a car outside Aunt Mimi's house.

The death traumatised Julia's children, and supposedly left John haunted with emotional difficulties, while Baird and Jacqui, who were just eleven and eight at the time, were sent to live with an aunt in Edinburgh, and were not allowed to attend the funeral service.

Looking back on her all-too-brief life with John, Baird responds without hesitation to the question of what, if anything, she would change in their journey, 'other than the obvious.'

"My choice that I would change would be that my mother hadn't died, because it was John's mother as well, and that changed our lives irrevocably. So, if you're going for change, I'd have to go back that far."