

Scream of the Crop

Yoko Ono's CD Re-Releases

BY KYLE GANN

When the bulk of Yoko Ono's music from the '70s and '80s, newly reissued by Rykodisc on 13 CDs, arrived in the mail, an older colleague of mine—a Beatles fan par excellence—was derisive: "You couldn't pay me to listen to that crap." My students, born several years after the Beatles broke up, were impressed: "Wow, she was doing that back in 1969? Cool." Which proves once again that whether you get any pleasure from Ono's sharply ambiguous fusion of concept art and rock depends on what you expect, and that depends on where you're coming from. Listening to the music with almost 30 years' hindsight makes her no easier to bring in to single focus, but allow me to defend at least the early discs from my skeptical colleague.



Yoko Ono, circa 1971: Her daring stream-of-consciousness collages and minimalist vocal assaults came from her background in the Fluxus movement.

I have to admit I didn't hear this material its first time around. Back in the '70s, I was interested in Ono's concept art, such as her minimalist films and the verbal instruction pieces in her *Grapefruit* book, but I was too much of an avant-garde snob to pay attention to what she did with John Lennon. Her six-disc *Onobox* anthology (also Rykodisc), which appeared in 1992, was culled to capitalize on her as a rock personality, and pretty much sidestepped the daring stream-of-consciousness collages and minimalist vocal assaults that come from her background in the post-Cage Fluxus movement. And so the early discs I'd missed—especially *Unfinished Music No. 1: Two Virgins* (1968), *Unfinished Music No. 2: Live With the Lions* (1969), *Yoko Ono/Plastic Ono Band* (1970), and *Fly* (1971)—round out a picture that reminds me why I was interested in her in the first place.

No surprise that the strident screaming on these early recordings sent Lennon fans scampering away in droves, but let's put Ono back in

her original context. Pauline Oliveros had used weird vocal sounds in her *Sound Patterns* of 1961, whence they spread into European music by Stockhausen, Dieter Schnebel, and others. Subsequently, several amazing vocalists—including Cathy Berberian, Bethany Beardslee, Joan LaBarbara, and Ono—developed extended vocal techniques into a virtuoso art. Within that world, Ono's uniqueness lay in her distinctive, wavery scream. If less versatile than some of the others, she was the first to apply the sound to rock, in *Yoko Ono/Plastic Ono Band*; over backgrounds of suitably conceptualist austerity.

Being first is nice, but where Ono occasionally transcended her milieu was in magnifying her vocal characteristics into overarching concepts for entire pieces, as in *Airmale*, *Why*, the itchy soundtrack for her film *Fly*, and most of all *Cambridge 1969*. This last work, from *Unfinished Music No. 2*, is an astonishing 26-minute tour de force in which Lennon's guitar-feedback drones and Ono's voice create an intense minimalism of subtly changing acoustical patterns. From the avant-garde viewpoint, every moment of this disc is golden, including the "found sound"

recording of a baby's heartbeat and two minutes of silence, which could count as either quotation or rip-off of John Cage's *4'33"*, repackaged for a pop audience. *No Bed for Beatle John* turns into a virtual commercial for the *Two Virgins* disc, sung in a simple chant style that composers like Cornelius Cardew and Christian Wolff later used for political texts. No disc better captured the deadpan, self-referential Fluxus spirit.

If *Cambridge 1969* is such dynamite, you want to ask, why didn't Ono and Lennon do more like that? The question gets partly answered via bonus tracks of previously unreleased material. The best of them, captured at home on cassette, feature Lennon bending his guitar playing to Ono's aesthetic, such as "Mulbury" (on *Unfinished No. 2*), where she croons innocently over wavery guitar playing that sounds like Robert Johnson gone mad. Or, even more impressively, "The South Wind" (on *Plastic Ono Band*), where Ono sings raspily against Lennon's bent tunings and ostinatos for a 16-minute free improv session that would have sounded hip in the late '80s. Lennon claimed he did his best guitaring in Ono's music, and these unearthed "home audios" bear that out.

With *Approximately Infinite Universe* (1973), Ono started fitting into the rock world, if uncomfortably, and the subsequent albums are filled with songs conventional in their format, if not always in their lyrics and subject matter. (On the bonus track to *Starpeace*, though, she sings "Imagine" to a live audience with a gutsy soulfulness that will surprise you.) The earlier albums will probably win over no more Beatles fans this time around than they did at first; file them next to Cage and La Monte Young, not the Beatles. The '60s avant-garde is undergoing close reexamination, and any collection extensive enough to include Tony Conrad or Charlemagne Palestine would be remiss not to take into account *Cambridge 1969*, *Airmale*, and *Fly*. Rather than regret Ono's influence on Lennon, thank goodness that one of the most fearless Fluxus artists achieved enough celebrity to get some records out. **V**

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