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<https://www.forbes.com/sites/nancyberk/2019/08/27/director-michael-epstein-discusses-john-and-yokos-creative-collaboration-and-the-challenges-that-led-to-imagine/#7bc1b5bd7891>

Director Michael Epstein Discusses John And Yoko's Creative Collaboration And The Challenges That Led To 'Imagine'



May 1971, John Lennon and wife Yoko Ono (Photo by Paul Popper/Popperfoto via Getty Images/Getty Images)

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Complicated subjects are the substance with which great documentaries are made. And few relationships were as intriguing, perplexing and complicated to the public than that of former Beatle John Lennon and his wife Yoko Ono. So it is perhaps no surprise that film director Michael Epstein dove into that topic to uncover and highlight the creative partnership that would greatly impact the music world and leave its mark on our cultural landscape in a multitude of ways. The feature-length film *John & Yoko: Above Us Only Sky*, now on Netflix and to be released on DVD, Blu-ray and digital on September 13, 2019, captures the couple's unique relationship and their creative journey that resulted in *Imagine*, Lennon's second studio album after leaving the Beatles.

Filled with previously-unseen footage, photographs and audio recordings, *Above Us Only Sky* invites audiences into the Tittenhurst Park home and the 1971 world of Lennon and Ono to witness the making of the iconic album. Along with an exclusive interview with Ono, are interviews with Lennon's son Julian and many of the players who were part of the Tittenhurst experience including personal assistant Dan Richter, photographer David Bailey, and studio designer Eddie Veale.

"The film's really a year in their life and it's a year of profound transition just as John is leaving the Beatles and trying to establish himself as John Lennon as an individual and to have his own voice and just before he's about to emigrate to New York and to really kind of, I think, in many ways be a refugee here in America. And in the midst of all of that, Yoko has brought a whole new language into his world, a creative language, a way of seeing things and allowing him to express himself in ways that I think he always wanted to, but didn't quite know how to," explains Epstein.



Former Beatle John Lennon (1940 - 1980) and wife Yoko Ono at their home, Tittenhurst Park, near Ascot, Berkshire, July 1971. (Photo by Michael Putland/Getty Images)
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Lennon's choices had an enormous impact on his popularity, which took a nosedive when his Beatles bond was broken, and was reflected by his early record sales. Lennon's assistant Richter more recently shared evidence of that with Epstein. "He said that one of his jobs was to call Apple in London to get the sales figures at the end of every month or something. And so he got the sales figures for *Plastic Ono Band* and he wrote them down in the back of his address book and he recently found his address book...the sale of *Plastic Ono Band* was 25,000 copies for John Lennon."

"Eventually it went gold, but it was not a success. And John made *Imagine* quite consciously, to try and get back onto the charts."

As fans struggled with the belief that they were losing one of their beloved Beatles, much blame and anger was directed at the woman they associated with Lennon's job shift. "It's not just the fact that he's trying to express himself and he's trying to define himself as an individual, he's doing that at the same time that the world he lives in hates profoundly the woman he loves deeply," notes the director who gained familiarity with the couple while directing the 2010 *American Masters* documentary *LennoNYC*.

Speaking volumes is the fact that the woman who was shunned by many is the woman who helped create one of the most influential songs of the 20th century ("Imagine" was declared song of the century by the National Music Publisher Association in 2017), an album that is believed to be one of the world's greatest (*Imagine* went #1 in the UK, US, and around the world.), and the footage that has given fans new access to the private life of Lennon. If antagonism breeds bitterness, Ono should be brimming with it, but her generosity in sharing the Lennon legacy and their relationship seems abundant. Not only was Epstein given access to valuable footage by Ono, he also was given full artistic freedom to create the compelling documentary—a project made possible because of Ono's 1971 suggestion that the experience be filmed.

Says Epstein, "The footage comes from the fact that they're making *Imagine* and Yoko had this crazy idea, which now is commonplace. I mean, now, you know, you have the Kardashians with Instagram and all this stuff. It didn't happen back then...there wasn't any of this. And the idea was, 'Well, let's film our life and then you know we'll make a movie, an experimental film that we'll release that will show our lives and we'll marry it to the soundtrack.' Kind of like what Beyonce does, right? But at a time when nobody was doing it."



UNITED STATES - SEPTEMBER 24: THE DICK CAVETT SHOW - 9/24/71, John Lennon and Yoko Ono chatted with host Dick Cavett., (Photo by Ann Limongello/Walt Disney Television via Getty Images) WALT DISNEY TELEVISION VIA GETTY IMAGES

But the Lennons didn't insist on staging or airbrushing. Bedroom scenes and bathroom moments are far from flattering, but they also convey a stripped down honesty that serves to reset viewers' preconceived notions about the couple, making their partnership and mutual contribution to the song "Imagine" more obvious. The film captures their collaborative efforts and the fact that the song is, as Epstein notes, a "marriage of John and Yoko" where the song is very much Ono's voice.

"That song's the perfect blending of those two ways of thinking and looking, and voices of the world...John took Yoko's voice and made it palpable for the general public in 'Imagine'. And that song is this kind of remarkable blending of two very unique, very strong, very smart artists who both...felt they had something important to say."



1971: Cover of the John Lennon classic album "Imagine", released in 1971. (Photo by Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images)
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Fascinatingly, the final photos used for the album art were not the ones taken by the couple's photographer, but the ones snapped by Ono. Fitting that the woman who knew Lennon best was the person who was able to capture his visual message as well.

Watch the trailer for John & Yoko: Above Us Only Sky

