

# The Man with Kaleidoscope Eyes



John Lennon's optometrist looks back at his most famous patient. Strange days, indeed. **By Gary Tracy, O.D.**

Yoko Ono!"

I was excited, but not shocked. John and Yoko had moved into the Dakota apartment building on West 72nd Street in 1973, and sightings of the famous couple on the Upper West Side were common.

The next night, again near closing, I was finishing up with a patient when I heard an unmistakable British-accented voice inquiring about an eye exam. My receptionist—a middle-aged woman from Guyana who didn't recognize our new walk-in—replied that she would be glad to set up an appointment.

Immediately, I bolted from the examination to explain that I was nearly done. Could I examine him momentarily? John agreed.

I remember my heart pounding while thinking, "I'd better get this prescription right!" I imagined headlines: "John Lennon Trips During Concert, Blames Optometrist for Poor Prescription," or "Ex-Beatle Now Blind—Optometrist Charged with Misdiagnosis."

Despite my nervousness, I managed to get through the exam.

John picked out some new frames. He always knew exactly what he wanted, staying true to the round or slightly off-round (P3) shapes he had made famous as a Beatle. He also insisted on cable temples (wraparounds), explaining they kept his frames on while jumping around on stage.

At the end of the visit, I asked John for his telephone number to let him know when his glasses were ready. He appeared hesitant. But he seemed pleased, even amused, when I offered to write it on the back of his file in code, and gave me the number.

## The Ballad of John and Yoko

John was a regular for next four years. Between 1975 and 1979, John had two complete eye exams, purchased more than a dozen pairs of glasses, and dropped in frequently for adjustments and repairs.

John and Yoko almost always arrived around closing time. After taking care of business, they would sit and chat for a while. Just small talk, usually about things going on in the neighborhood.

During those four years, Yoko

I was John Lennon's optometrist for the last four years of his life, when he and Yoko lived on the Upper West Side of New York City. Thirty years later, patients are still asking what he was like. Here are some of my memories.

## A Day In the Life

I first met John and Yoko in 1975. I had opened my practice a year earlier, at 284 Columbus Avenue. Back then, the neighborhood was still kind of "iffy."

One winter night near closing, I noticed a couple gazing into the store, their faces pressed against the window. A few minutes later, my friend Neil, owner of the flower shop next door, stopped in to tell me "That was John Lennon and

never availed herself of my services. She mostly stayed in the background, always quiet, polite and non-assuming. Although John often came in alone, I felt that when Yoko was present, she had a calming, soothing effect on him.

One day, John came with his son Julian, who was visiting from England. In a fatherly manner, he recommended that Julian should make sure that his frames had wraparound temples, similar to John's preference. Julian selected an aviator shape that was popular at the time, and I managed to find one with the wraparound temples, so he could fulfill his father's recommendation.

One day John and Yoko dropped by to pick up new eyeglasses. John was toting a tiny baby in a papoose carrier on his back. They told me that this was the first time they'd ventured out of the Dakota in public with their newly born son Sean.

### Working Class Hero

I never asked John about The Beatles or being a celebrity. From what I learned later, he had an ordinary, blue-collar upbringing. I really think he enjoyed being in an environment where he was treated like an ordinary person.

Still, I remained somewhat in awe. One day, knowing John was coming in, I brought in a beat up copy of "A Spaniard in the Works," an obscure book of John's sketches and poems I'd purchased for 25 cents in one of the neighborhood antique stores. I was secretly hoping he would offer to sign it. He seemed pleased to see the book, but did not offer to autograph it—and I didn't feel comfortable asking.

Another time, John and I were chatting in my office when he suddenly paused in mid-sentence: "Is that Paul?" I was taken aback,

because there was no one else in the office or visible on the sidewalk outside the window. I asked John whom he meant. He had heard Paul McCartney's voice singing from my radio upstairs. I wasn't even aware the radio was on. I realized then how finely attuned John was to the music of his former band mate.

Several long-time patients fondly remember encountering John in my office, offering advice on the frames they were trying on. One patient recalls trying on contact lenses when John's voice surprised him from behind: "I tried to wear them, but the only way I could keep them in my bloody eyes was to get bloody stoned first."

### Help!

One afternoon, walking back from lunch to my office on Columbus Avenue, I spotted John coming toward me. He seemed shaken. He told me that someone had been following him all morning, and asked me to accompany him. He thought that if we drew attention to this person, then he would leave. Pointing to a disheveled person with a trench coat, John started yelling, "That's the person who's been following me." I joined John, pointing and yelling, "That's the person!"

It worked. He sped up and disappeared around the corner. John and I walked to my office, where I locked the door. John stayed until he was sure the person was completely gone.

On one of his last visits to my office, John finally strayed from his usual metal round frame. Wanting something different for his new sunglasses, he selected a rectangular, clear plastic frame with dark gray lenses. I believe these are the glasses that appear in photographs with bloodstains on them, on the tragic night he was killed on December 8,



**The cover of Yoko Ono's 1981 album depicts John Lennon's blood-spattered glasses. Dr. Gary Tracy believes these were a pair he ordered for John Lennon.**

1980.

A couple of years after John's death, Yoko came in for an exam. Seated in the examination chair, tears welled in her eyes as she reminisced about John, and expressed concern that Sean was now old enough to recognize and hear negative publicity about his father. She asked if I would meet with Sean to share my experience with the "real" John. I agreed, but a meeting was never arranged. I never saw or heard from Yoko again.

Years later, Sean did come in, with a prescription in hand. I made many pairs of glasses for him over the years.

When I was young, I sometimes questioned whether I'd made the right decision to become an optometrist and move to New York. But it has been a privilege to be a part of the Upper West Side for so many years. Being an independent optometrist in New York City has given me the opportunity to know many fascinating and diverse people, both celebrities and non-celebrities. Where else would I have had the opportunity to meet someone like John Lennon? ■