

Depending Upon Whose Side You're On

*Living with John Lennon's
most personal Beatles song*

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The first time I saw *Help!*, the Beatles' second film, I was

fifteen, home alone, in Ridgefield, Connecticut, in January, 1991.

The basement was my private lair, unsuccessful though I often was in keeping out intruders, like my two younger sisters. That's probably how it went for a lot of teenagers in a time when it was pretty uncommon to have a TV in your room. And so, master of the house, I welcomed the opportunity to be a Phantom of the Rec Room, the sole inhabitant of the furnished side of the basement where I curled up on an aged, calico pillow—it looked like a cross between a mushroom and a pin cushion Swift's Gulliver might have used—devouring bag upon bag of taco chips and salsa, a familiar pastime for which I conferred upon myself the sobriquet Sir Salsa.

I wasn't a complete layabout, though—I was a hockey player, which is why I was home on my own on that gray January day. You know those kinds of days, where the sky is all marmoreal and reminds you of a slab of borax. The rest of my family was up in Massachusetts, where we used to live. Someone was being confirmed—an event important enough for my family to make the three hour drive and put in an appearance, but not important enough to excuse me from hockey practice.

With the place to myself, my friend down the street was primed for an epic bacchanalia, which, I well knew, would involve drinking several sodas—orange if we were feeling especially crazy—and a game of knee hockey, which is just what it sounds like: scrambling on your knees with a little hockey stick, hitting a pink foam ball, the giant mushroom/pin cushion serving as one goal, and a turned-over table as the other.

But screw that. I had more crucial business to attend to. *Help!* was showing on a local TV station and there was no way I was going to let anything get in the way of me seeing that bad boy for the first time. *A Hard Day's Night*, the Beatles' first film, from '64, had not only changed my life the year before, it had changed the very person

I was. Or, perhaps I should say, it was the inception of the person I would go on to be, in all of my different iterations of myself. Though, to be honest, I was pretty certain that *Help!* was not a very good film. But there I was, thinking, as I unscrewed another jar of salsa, that manna, of a sort, would soon be at hand. After all, you only get one chance to see a film for the first time, and even if the film sucks, still, it was the Beatles.

The film is terrible, with the Beatles mucking about in a sort of James Bond pastiche, with the whole plot turning about the silly device of a special ring on Ringo's finger, but I didn't care. I wasn't watching a movie, I felt, so much as I was watching sounds. You can watch *A Hard Day's Night* for its casual and assured artistry—a blend of zonked-out surrealism, crisp cinematography, inspired lighting, and grab-you-and-get-you-going energy. The only reason to watch *Help!* is the music.

And so on a day when I still thought of myself as a burgeoning hockey star, the gourmand known as Sir Salsa, and a master *TV Guide* scanner all at once, the first phase of an epiphany that would later save me—as of this writing, anyhow—was put in motion. What no one tells you, whether you're fifteen or fifty, is that epiphanies can have parts to them, and the first part can be ignorance, with something happening to you, and lodging in you, that will fructify later when you need it more, when the stink of your hockey equipment bag isn't choking the air of your basement lair where you sit and hope that you're loads cooler than you really are.

“Help!” is a song that crashes into you, an explosion to the chest. Beginning with a full-throated shout, the transition from silence—that moment after dropping the needle or pressing play—is more pronounced with “Help!” than any other song that kicks off a Beatles record, even more so than the mega-chord that ushered in both *A Hard Day's Night* and a new cultural era. It's what I think of as a pouncer. You are sitting there, doing your thing, and boom, that sucker is upon you.

On “Help!” George Harrison’s guitar chords have a Wagnerian *oomph* to them. They feel physical, like sounds that can actually inflict some damage on you. People tend to associate Jimi Hendrix’s playing with channeled lighting, but Harrison’s fret work here strikes me as even more live-wire, like his guitar is channeling the electrical possibilities of the creation scene in James Whale’s classic film *Frankenstein*, where Boris Karloff’s monster lurches to life way back in 1931 in a sequence that seems destined to remain futuristic.

Beneath Harrison’s lead work, thrashing forward in an attempt to keep up—or else find a secure, stable center, a place of sonic respite—is Lennon’s rhythm guitar. And one scrappy rhythm guitar it is. I think of it as the song’s spirit, in a sense: overwhelmed, drowned out at times, it bashes onwards regardless.

Lennon’s guitar is also more percussive in its way than the drums, a neat trick. What you really hum along to—when you hum along to “Help!”—is that acoustic guitar work. Lennon was no technical master, but he could drive a song (have a listen to “Roll Over Beethoven,” from *With The Beatles*; the entire rhythmic chassis is that churning guitar pattern under Harrison’s more nimble—and practiced-to-death, no doubt—lead) and “Help!” needs to be driven. Or, one suspects, it would never have taken shape. Because we’re talking about something awfully bleak here, in a way, and, naturally, more effort is required to rip one’s self open, in effect, and say, “Bloody hell, this is what’s going on, this is the place I’m coming from.”

Befitting the jumble the film became, the title for *Help!* remained in considerable flux for a time. Director Richard Lester favored *Beatles 2*, which might have gotten the Beatles’ second cinematic venture confused with a classical opus at first glance. Ringo Starr, who had a knack for uttering bizarre phrases that stuck—“a hard day’s night” and “tomorrow never knows” were both Ringo coinages—suggested *Eight Arms to Hold You*, lending the slant of a Liverpudlian octopus’ garden, perhaps. Someone hit upon the idea of simply

going with the word for that most desperate of human calls—it was very direct, at least, though unintentionally suggested the film could use some aid, dear viewer—and Lennon and Paul McCartney went off to try and write the title track with only a title in hand.

But an inertia had no doubt by then corrupted that usual workmanlike approach both Lennon in particular and the Beatles in general had applied to the business of writing songs in the time since *A Hard Day's Night*. That album—the one perfect album the band ever waxed, and the lone Beatles LP to be entirely comprised of Lennon and McCartney originals—had been followed-up by *Beatles for Sale* in December 1964, the album that effectively began the band's interregnum period.

After the likes of “A Hard Day's Night,” “She Loves You,” “Please Please Me,” “I'll Be Back,” “I Want to Hold Your Hand,” “I Saw Her Standing There,” and “Can't Buy Me Love,” it's hard—not that one was disappointed, exactly, as the Beatles still had a knack for making the old sound entirely of the present—to get geared up over covers of Chuck Berry's “Rock and Roll Music”—which Lennon joked, in an interview segment on the BBC, went on for an age—and Buddy Holly's “Words of Love.” *Beatles for Sale* was patchwork. They knew it, you knew it, they knew you knew it, and you knew they knew you knew it.

The tempo—*molto allegro* beat group style—of Lennon's composition for the title “Help!” is enough to let you know things are changing. Fast songs tend not to express deep introspection or emotions we associate with desperation. The same can be said for songs featuring driving snare drum fills of the sort Ringo executes before every chorus. *Rat-tat-tat-tat!* Drumming in jackhammer mode.

Four years later, while recording “Don't Let Me Down,” Lennon asked Ringo to create this big, wild surge of noise—just before the chorus—to give him the courage to come screaming in. Some Lennon songs are more naked than others, and on that score, “Don't Let Me Down” is pretty damn exposed. “Help!” though, covers things up

a bit. Scale back the tempo, knock out the power drumming, quiet those *Frankenstein*-ian lead guitar lines from Harrison, take some of the rumble out of McCartney's bass, soften Lennon's chording, and you'd have a sort of Delta blues song by way of the river Mersey rather than the Mississippi, sung by a man who should have been anywhere but in the place that, say, Robert Johnson was when he was forced to try and fend off hellhounds.

With Lennon, we're talking about a rich guy at what the Beatles once described as the "Toppermost of the Poppermost." Fame as big as anyone had ever had. Which, for Lennon, didn't mean a jot in alleviating other, more internal concerns.

The lyric speaks of need. It is a song of desperation, with a sense of its own slant on posterity. The man who reaches an end, or thinks he has, stops thinking in terms of what he will do later, and begins to look back, framing everything against what has come before, as though making a final tally of his life.

This is not a good place to be in, but it's where the singer of "Help!" definitely is. Time becomes untethered in such a situation, dislocated from its standard conventions, its very rules. And so, the young man can talk as though he were an old man about being "so much younger than today," because what goes on in one's head, what one feels as far as pain goes, is not subject to the same rules that time imposes outside of the head, back in the real world, where only so much can happen to a given person at once.

The song's quietest moment occurs on the bridge, after we've exploded through a couple choruses. This is the track's offering of a respite, or as near as we're going to get, the sound of a fatigued singer, gathering himself for one final, violent push, much as Janis Joplin would gather herself, before announcing that she was "coming around for the last time" during her Monterey Pop performance of "Ball and Chain." But this is no enjoyable respite. There's a wheeziness to the vocals—an inhaler might prove useful, you sense—which have now slackened, some of their virtuosic intensity having been

replaced with a need to purge, to be purged, to just have done with everything, once and for all. A straight up declaration of need sounded, at this point, not so that pleas might be answered, but because there is nothing else to be done, no clever solutions are coming. And when there is no more left to be done, one does what I think of as the right thing—that thing you do because you should do it, not because it’s necessarily going to lead to anything—and hopes for the best.

When the racket resumes, you are pleased, relieved. The lone voice has rejoined its mates, and their enthusiasm, reflected by that frenetic ensemble playing, may buoy our man through. But we do not know that. More to the point, we know that he does not know that. That’s been the gist of what he’s been trying to say. And him not knowing is far worse than us not knowing, and leaves you considering how you’d feel, if his lot ever became yours.

My early encounters with “Help!” saw me listening to the song in what was mostly cheery company. That is, on compilation albums, starting with *Twenty Greatest Hits*, I think it was called. Generic. No esoteric selections, just those mega-sellers. The so-called Red Album, a compilation covering the years 1962-66 was a step up, as you got a better sampling of that most fecund period, with some album tracks amidst the radio hits.

It’s easy now, when we consider the Beatles’ music half a century on, to think of them as these manic hit-makers—sublime popsmiths—with records instantly recallable to memory following one after another, and another and another. But they were also—or primarily, you might even say—an in-your-face rock and roll band, a band that was tighter and more badass in their way than anyone else. Stones, Who, Yardbirds, Small Faces, you name it. With the Beatles, so much product was created that it became ever easier to think of the band as a cottage industry, maybe the biggest cottage industry, as far as entertainment acts go, and that’s an idea at odds with hell-for-leather rock and roll bad-assery. Which means, mostly, we could do with listening again as our lives change. Art and the self,

I have learned, may not ride together, but they do tend to serve as filling stops for each other.

I bopped my head to “Help!” as a kid in the back seat of the car as my family rolled along to the latest clam shack on those North Falmouth Cape Cod beaches, oblivious to whatever my parents were saying up front, or even to how my sisters were poking me, a futile pursuit when I was “in my Beatles”—I liked to put it that way, after reading, somewhere, the expression “in my cups,” and having no clue what it meant. These were the Sir Salsa years, so, yeah, I was a bit of a twat. But doing that head bop thing to “Help!” had the effect of making me feel like I was tapping my foot along to a piece of piano music being played at a funeral, despite the breakneck tempo. This was unnerving, but it wasn’t my funeral, near as I could tell, so I didn’t sweat it too much. On other occasions, those crashing guitar chords—I mean, Lennon was power-chording on an acoustic guitar—gave me the sense of making my way through some foreign locale, with customs I did not understand, and swaying to music I had mistaken as a soundtrack for something happier.

In these imaginings, a guy looking like Juan Valdez, that coffee-hawking fellow from TV who was dressed like he might have stepped out of Howard Hawks’ *Rio Bravo*, would put his hand on my arm, and say, “no, *señor*, no,” and then I’d fall back in with the proper modes of behavior.

“Help!” probably should not resonate with you as much at fifteen as it will later in life, although I would be the first to say that I wish it had never resonated with me in the way it eventually did. The song, no doubt, was useful during those adolescent years when one thinks one’s problems are gargantuan in scope, full of angst that could inform a Greek tragedy, or a Shakespearean one, anyway. Such feelings are what *Romeo and Juliet* is for. I remember raising my hand once in English class, getting called, and saying something like a total dickhead. Everyone stared at me, and, God help me, I thought of making a Beatles comment about how I used to bop my head to “Help!” before the Juan Valdez guy started coming along,

and did anyone have any insight about why that might have been, or any clue about the whole piano-funeral-music business? Turn the entire venture around, you see. But I just kept my mouth shut. And I wondered more about a song that I thought I would understand better later. That made me nervous.

Lennon's voice is especially flinty on "Help!" That gorgeous, leathery tone of 1963 and 1964—a leathery tone with honeyed overtones and melodic upticks on the ends of words that round each line into the next—is gone. It is no more. It will not do.

The bray that we hear on the bridge of "This Boy," the November '63 B-side to "I Want to Hold Your Hand," which features a quintessential Lennon scream—one that is executed sequentially, like it has parts to it—on the word "cry," is in evidence here, but "Help!" so far as the singing goes, is a screamless record.

The song is a scream, make no mistake, a howl, a plea, a prayer, and, most disturbingly, the sound of an epiphany: namely, that the howl, the plea, the prayer, may not be answered. Or, worse still, not heard. Or maybe heard and discounted. Supposing that we can, at times, inhabit a sort of hell on earth, hell becomes all the more hellish when you attempt to convince someone of your current residence, only to have your words blow past them, not gaining a foothold, like wrappers going down the street, because there is not enough overlap between your experience and any they have had. And what you don't realize when you're fifteen, that you may come to realize later (unless you get lucky, and life never puts this challenge to you), is that few things, if anything, are harder to ask for than help.

You are not just asking for something. We ask for things every day. Milk in our coffee, more pay at work, better table manners from the kids, a blow job at night. But when you ask for help, the kind of help that Lennon is singing about in this crashing, electric blast of a song that sounds louder than it actually is, you are saying: *I am not up to this. I thought I was, but I'm not. I have failed to find a solution on*

my own. My life, should it ever become entirely my own life again, now requires the presence and assistance of a person who is not me. Will you help me make my life mine again? I am sorry to ask so much of you.

That is not a fun thing to have to say. Some of us, no doubt, are far better at saying it than others. Others of us are much worse. I would have thought, after so many years of listening to this John Lennon composition, thinking about it, thinking about why it made me so uneasy, and about why the Juan Valdez guy had to step forward in my imagination so many times to stop my foot tapping, that I'd have been up for the challenge. Alas, I would have been way wrong.

I called them train days. They didn't happen often, but I'd know, very early in the morning, when one was upon me.

Having lost the most important person in my life—a person who I had been—without any explanation, nor, as it would turn out, any closure that comes with explanation, I spent a lot of time alone.

One of the reasons I spent a lot of time alone was because—and I could hardly blame people—I had become that guy whose pain was so encompassing that you feared some of it would rub off on you if you stayed too long in his miasma. You had tried to say things, and you had said things, but you knew, at the same time, nothing could cut into that pain, and you were glad, frankly, that it was not yours, but you did not enjoy the guilt that realization made you feel. Maybe time could make a dent in the pain, but time works best in these matters when answers are available, as though answers are the healing process's equivalent of starting blocks. Sans starting blocks, there is nothing to push off of, firm ground turns to quick sand, and one finds one's self ensnared in a boggy spot that might as well be chock full of clocks—it all goes a bit Dali-esque—for all of their failures to do what clocks should do and tick off the seconds of some kind of progress being made. In these situations, it all goes into the soup.

At thirty-six, trying to keep myself going, trying to keep myself from putting myself in front of a train, I had both a need to listen to “Help!” and to avoid “Help!”

I had a little bag. A tote bag. From a place I used to go—a farm on the North Shore of Boston—with the person who defined, in many ways, the person I had become, whom I no longer knew.

I had a bottle of water in the tote bag. Some granola bars. It was a biodegradable tote bag. I made sure of that. Because I knew I’d be leaving it in the woods, and, as someone who likes the woods, I didn’t want to litter. I figured I’d take the train up to Gloucester, Massachusetts, where there was a good stretch of forest and cover. You could walk out into the sticks, sit there with some food and water to sustain you through the decision-making process—I determined I’d have to sort of persuade myself to go through with it—and then walk back out with enough stuff to hide behind and obscure your purpose such that when you made your dash in front of the oncoming train, it’d be too late for the conductor to do anything about it. Nor could he blame himself later. That was also important to me.

There is a demo version of “Help!” that Beatles fans like to argue over. It’s just Lennon at the piano, and it lasts less than a minute. The common argument centers on whether it’s from 1965 or from later in Lennon’s career and after the Beatles’ career: a man with a need to revisit his own previous—but prior—hell on earth. You can listen to the cut on YouTube. It’s sparse, and has more in common with a Skip James piano blues than a pop nugget from Liverpool.

Lennon had a curious relationship with his own song. The Beatles performed it throughout their 1965 concerts and on *The Ed Sullivan Show* and on *Blackpool Night Out*, which was perhaps their most spirited TV appearance. Invariably, he’d screw up the words. Like, every time. You have to wonder about something like that. Here’s this guy’s most personal song to date, by his own admission, something he had lived and knew, and yet, the lyrics never came out right.

On the August 1 Blackpool date, the penultimate number is Paul McCartney's "Yesterday," a song that, in spirit, at least, was its own form of blues, even though its balladic trappings—and string section—obscure that sensibility, somewhat. The song is, on the surface, about the loss of McCartney's mother, but it's grander than that: it too expresses that notion of a young man, made emotionally old before his time, looking back on an earlier, happier self.

During my train days, I also struggled with "Yesterday." The Beatles had always been the great constant, and comfort, in my life. Well, almost always. Sometimes, there were troughs to go with the crests. But I did not wish to have the Beatles wrested from me, as everything had been wrested from me. My house, my life, my piece of mind, my spouse, my best friend, my once happy memories, my health, my ability to trust anyone.

After his mother died, in September 1958, Lennon became an angry drunk, super aggressive and violent, akin to that terrified dog who would bite you first rather than assess your intentions, a kick or kindness. As I packed, emptied, and repacked my pathetic biodegradable tote bag, from a farm which doubled as a symbol for a lack of pain I never thought I'd know again, I realized that I was a version of that dog myself.

I could not listen to the *Help!* album, but for some reason, I could listen to a bootleg of the Blackpool gig. I didn't know why, for a while. I didn't know why it was that version of "Help!" that I could tolerate, that I could find instructive.

McCartney concludes the definitive live version of "Yesterday"—his performance is a solo turn, with just him on the stage—and you are conscious of having seen something very intimate, something less like live rock and roll and more like an almost healing form of emotional voyeurism. Lennon then walks back to his microphone without the most assured of gaits. He does look heavy, and he doesn't wear his newfound weight well. He cracks a joke by saying, "Thank you, Ringo, that was just wonderful." A capable joke, but something of a diffuser—

of tension, maybe of expectation. An outburst of teenybopper *ooing* and *ahhing* follows. It's awkward, like, now is not the time for this. Lennon becomes somewhat confrontational, but with a smirk.

"This is our latest record," he begins, before pausing to look down at his Rickenbacker guitar. He does a violent little impromptu jig which was a defense mechanism—and a nasty one at that—stemming from how uncomfortable crippled kids would make him at Beatles meet-and-greets. This is awkward. It is also time to get on with things. "Or our latest electronic noise, depending upon whose side you're on," he concludes. You pick a side. You aim to pick the right side. Maybe you don't give a rat's ass and you just end up on a side. Maybe, more than anything, you hope people are on your side. Or, maybe, more than that, you hope you yourself are on your own side, and for the right reasons.

The version of "Help!" that follows is one I tried to watch whenever I woke up and felt like a train day had started. Each time, I'd stop at the point Lennon starts to cock up the lyric, feeling as though I had heard enough. It was like the sacred, that which must not be corrupted—our need for assistance from our fellow man—had been intruded upon by the profane, this useless slurring in the middle of something that was as human as human can be, and so, in a sense divine. But that's like what everything had become for me. Those North Falmouth Cape Cod memories had been vitiated—raped—and there was the hollowing pain of every day, which meant my present was a mess, my future looked anywhere from bleak to nonexistent, and now even the happier portions of my past had come undone.

I did make it as far as those Gloucester woods, but obviously I made it back from them as well. I sat there for a while. Couldn't eat any of the granola bars, because I knew I'd throw them up. Which shouldn't have mattered, as I threw up most days, and the blood vessels in my face seemed to be perpetually exploded so that I often had this lattice-work of red lines across both of my cheeks. I saw a turkey. Got right up next to me. That was nice.

But in the end, I came home, and I listened, over and over again, to that plaintive piano version of “Help!” which I am certain is older Lennon looking back on younger Lennon during the latter’s crisis of the soul. He would not have had train days, but the singer of “Help!”—as a character, or the actual man—would have known what I meant.

I reached out to my friend John, who lives in D.C. I told him I was having a hard time keeping myself going. I thought I was being all heroic, and doing what was so hard to do: namely, asking for help. That wasn’t easy for me. It wasn’t easy needing to be phoned and babied through every day of my life, such as it was.

There was one person who was harder than any other person to ask for help, and that person was also the person who, it seemed, was least suited to give it, something I knew better than anyone, considering it was me.

My favorite scene in *Help!* shows the Beatles in the studio, recording “You’re Going to Lose that Girl,” a sort of “She Loves You” lite, and a song I probably should have heeded as especially melodic life advice, back then.

It’s a fictional recording session, of course, not some documentary look-in. And, like “She Loves You,” this is what you might term one of the band’s warning songs, told from the perspective of a guy giving advice to his lovelorn buddy. Only, unlike with “She Loves You,” which is mostly well-intentioned—the idea of, “hey, mate, straighten up or she’s going to leave you”—this one is a touch more rapacious. As in, “ha, keep screwing this up, kid, and I am going to be all over your girl.”

The colors seem to be toned down in this particular sequence, with the soft recording studio lighting providing a muted aspect to a film that otherwise shouts its head off at you. Cigarette smoke dominates the *mise-en-scène*, creating this velvety, plush—but sooty—effect, like the haze from the TV might make its way into the

room where you're sitting and gobble up your taco chips and salsa, like something out of John Carpenter's *The Fog*.

Lennon sings the lead in "You're Going to Lose that Girl" and his voice is different than it was in '64, when *A Hard Day's Night* came out. The perfect rock and roll voice, which is what you get with Lennon from '63-'64, has become more tart, less wide-eyed, you might say, and more astringent, as though a certain impurity has entered into the mix, one that is jostling for a place of its own within the familiar frame of love and girls and the usual stuff that goes along with all of that.

My first thought when I heard "You're Going to Lose that Girl" that initial time was: What the hell has happened? I didn't mind the downbeat feel. I rather liked it, actually, although I didn't know why. Lennon was always game for warning people in songs, in this pretty threatening way, like he couldn't wait to do it, and was just looking for the latest opportunity. Normally he—or the protagonist he was portraying—was a total dick with these warnings, telling you, basically, to fuck off and get away from his woman.

"You're Going to Lose that Girl" was darker. It was personal in a way I'd never heard any song be personal before. I don't mean because of that surfeit of aggression. Sure, I liked that. At fifteen you like that sort of thing. You think you're hard. You think about how you'd probably look good in sunglasses and that look would reveal inner, deeper things about you, and the girl you were too scared to ask to dance would finally start to understand you and what she'd been missing. You start to think about what your own eventual adult world will be like when you've sliced the mooring lines and finally committed to shipping out for something bigger, better, more you.

None of those things, of course, will happen, and you probably know that, on some level, even when you're a fifteen-year-old basement denizen, but that's not the point. The point is that yours will be a malleable future, and the final form will be of your choosing, and your daydreaming is enough to suggest a kernel of this enormous

truth that will power you through the next few years, at least. That's how you think at that age, because you are in no position to realize, let alone comprehend, how any time you think you've turned into one thing, you're busy turning into another. Others. All at once.

But Lennon seemed to offer some control, a way to manage these internal forces and hopes and doubts. In "You're Going to Lose that Girl," control comes in the form of advice which says, in effect, change your conduct, or else you're going to find that your girl is done and gone, and guys like me—the baddies—well, we're out there waiting for your moment of weakness. We're like a lot of things in life that way. Don't learn it the hard way, dude.

Harrison's voice is more pronounced than is usual for him in the backing vocals, which have a lovely lilt, as though they've come straight from the pages of a volume of Irish poetry. There's a madrigal aspect here as well, the feeling that this is holy advice, that we are in on a compact, delivered in a quiet, unassuming way, with all of the bristle coming courtesy of the song's undercurrent of "this will happen if that doesn't."

Lennon had evolved as a singer to such a degree that his lead vocal is informed by the backing vocal, and he builds various climatic exhortations off the series of vocal waves coming from behind him, so that we end up with a soundscape akin to a lead orator and Greek chorus engaged in counterpoint.

The blues is at play here as well, but the singing is so communal that it's hard to imagine Delta luminaries like Robert Johnson, Charlie Patton, or Son House, so accustomed to bearing their burdens alone, finding anything to drink in. Maybe, hearing "You're Going to Lose that Girl" in some dive bar in some corner of the afterlife, they'd be moved to try to compose some vocal polyphony of their own before returning to those highly individualized, forlorn laments, the fallback stuff for when life leaves you little opportunity to fall back on anything.

Those artists would later inform my life as well, in ways I did

not know were possible. But even still, I realized that their blues, that killer, “it-is-two-in-the-a.m.-I-am-all-alone-I-see-no-hope-Oh-God-please-finish-me” blues, was not as deep—nor as effective—as Lennon’s. Effective as what? Panacea? No. Not nearly. Comfort? Hardly. Cautionary tale? Nope—Lennon’s blues, his ’65 variety, was more than that. Effective at getting you to do something you might be helpless to do on your own.

