

# Lennon's art-cult or culture?

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by Stewart Cunningham

When John Lennon was shot, it was almost impossible for anyone not consciously avoiding all newspapers, magazines, and newscasts to remain ignorant of the event for long. Not only was Lennon's death on the front page of every major paper and most minor ones, but his face adorned the covers of both *Time* and *Newsweek* the week after his death. There were also numerous locally and nationally produced television retrospectives of his life and career. It is quite natural for the news media to devote a considerable amount of time and energy to recording the death and commemorating the life of a prominent person, especially one who died young and in particularly brutal circumstances. But the coverage accorded Lennon's seems incongruously copious when compared to the coverage accorded other people who died during the same year: Henry

Miller, Jean-Paul Sartre, Oskar Kokoscha, and Katherine Anne Porter, to name just four.

There are those who would claim that Lennon was a person of greater achievement and more profound cultural influence than these others, but that is at best a highly questionable claim, at worst a display of militant ignorance.

Miller was one of the most influential and respected writers in twentieth-century American literature. Porter was of comparable eminence and influence, although her work was in a radically different style.

Sartre was one of the most prominent philosophers of our time; many of his ideas have entered the basic vocabulary of contemporary intellectual discourse and it is impossible to understand modern thought without understanding Sartre.

Kokoscha, of course, was an artist of rare talent and luminous vision, whose works are among the most rewarding products of this century's art.

None of these individuals can be considered anything

less than a major cultural figure. John Lennon, however pleasing his music may be, was a popular entertainer, not a serious artist. He was a man of soft idealism, not hard ideas; anyone seeking coherent, inventive, or practical thoughts in his songs will be sorely disappointed.

It is not necessary for one to agree with my assessment of Lennon (or with that of a faculty member who said that "for all the guff written about him, John Lennon was a fifth-rate poet and a fourth-rate musician.") to be disturbed by the disproportionately extensive coverage of Lennon's death, compared to the deaths of Miller, Porter, Sartre, and Kokoscha, who "merited" only stories in the third and fourth sections of newspapers and were hardly mentioned on most newscasts. Indeed, not one of these individuals appeared on the front page of either *Time* or *Newsweek*.

The answer lies in the fact that Lennon was known to more people than those other four combined. The fact that

John Lennon was dead affected far more people than the passing of Henry Miller. This can be seen as a justification for the coverage given Lennon by those periodicals that are frankly and unapologetically commercial in intent. It does not justify the front-page stories on Lennon that covered such papers as the *New York Times* and the *Boston Globe*, papers that, however much one may quarrel with their ideological biases, one can hardly consider crassly commercial. It is apparent that even in the editorial offices of such journals there is a belief that the extent to which an event is immediately comprehensible to the reader (e.g.; his familiarity with the people involved) is what determines the story's importance as news.

This is true, but only to a rather small extent. A newspaper must attempt to tell the public the most important news above all else; often the public will, by its own concern, determine what is important (an election with a large turnout, the resolution of a political issue that the public has shown great interest in). But the public is often ignorant of the role that an isolated event will play.

There is no sense of perspective about certain things, a situation the press can do much to remedy. If the public

is shattered by the death of John Lennon and utterly indifferent to that of, say, Kenneth Tynan, perhaps it should be taken by the nose and told that Mr. Lennon was a popular musician and nothing more whereas Mr. Tynan was a writer and critic who had considerable influence in the British theatre at one time. Long, maudlin, and stupid articles describing Lennon as "the conscience of his generation" and "the spokesman for an era" are not helpful. At best they, along with the headlines and pictures, reinforce existing myths about Lennon's place in history, if they do not create new ones.

Of course, historical perspective is rarely found in daily journalism. It is asking a great deal for newspaper editors to place events in a historical framework as they occur. Yet, by deciding how much space a story will get, and placing it on a certain page, newspaper editors cannot help but give an implied statement on the relative importance of an event. Journalism, as Chalmers Roberts of the *Washington Post* once wrote, is the first rough draft of history, and the man writing that first rough draft has an obligation to cast one eye in the direction of the future, and look skeptically upon the short-sighted men following the cult at the moment.

## Maritimes have it

by Jane Gormley

Who says that the Maritimes have nothing to contribute to the field of Canadian Art? This week's A.S.O. concert certainly abolished the myth that Canada's eastern cultural boundary stops at Montreal. The concert featured two Maritime artists, a composer and a performer.

The concert opened with a "Sonata for String Orchestra" by Michael R. Miller. Mr. Miller (who was present in the audience that night) is a professor of theory and composition at Mount Allison University.

The work began with great promise. The A.S.O. strings appeared to be in the best of form, producing some fine ensemble work. But later the promise was broken. As the piece progressed, their precision tended to lag. By the final movement, Miller's contrapuntal writing was often lost due to ragged technical passages.

The second piece on the programme was Maurice Ravel's "Piano Concerto in G Major" performed by Marcia D'Entremont, a native of Moncton, N.B. Prior to the writing of this work, Ravel had made a visit to New York where he met George Gershwin and heard him perform his "Rhapsody in Blue" as well as other compositions. Ravel marvelled at the rhythmic intricacies in Gershwin's music. Gershwin asked to study with Ravel, but Ravel discouraged him, telling him that he may

lose his great melodic spontaneity and write bad Ravel. Ravel's great admiration for Gershwin is made evident by the ever present jazz rhythms in the first and last movements of the concerto. These, Ms. D'Entremont executed with clear technical facility. Ravel's mastery of orchestration also shines through with his prominent use of the more unusual instruments of the orchestra such as the piccolo, the english horn and the harp. He even uses instruments that aren't really there! Placing bassoons and clarinets in their high range with wide vibrato produces a sound very close to that of a saxophone. Often the piano tended to be very much subordinate to the orchestra. Perhaps Ravel intended it to be this way, using the piano simply as another one of the unusual orchestral instruments in his overall color. However in the slow lyrical movement there was a definite need for more projection from the piano.

The final piece was "Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme" by Richard Strauss (not to be confused with Johann). Based on Moliere's play about a common bourgeois trying to become nobility, this comical suite of pieces made for some very easy listening, a piece one might expect to find on any Boston Pops programme.

The guest conductor Simon Streatfield was warmly applauded after the light-hearted

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