

She Loved Him, Yeah, Yeah, Yeah

John Lennon died 25 years ago Thursday. One woman remembers another Beatles death and a journey she took on behalf of an ex-husband.



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IF I hadn't called my ex-husband the last time a Beatle died, I wouldn't have had to do anything. But I did track him down after George Harrison died in November 2001, which is when he learned that I was living in New York, which is when he asked me to take a letter to Strawberry Fields in Central Park and place it there with a single candle.

"How am I going to get the letter?" I asked.

"I'll e-mail it to you," he responded.

I could have taken the letter to Central Park that day; the park was within walking distance of my office. Instead, I carried it in and out of the subway for days, wondering how on earth I was actually going to do what my ex-husband had asked me to do.

It's not because he loved the Beatles that I had loved him and thought I could spend the rest of my life with him. It's not that he was a track star or that he had blue eyes or that he was handsome and sweet-looking. It's not that his parents

were the only people I knew who were still married. It's not that it was hard to fall in love with the gentlest boy I had ever known.

It was because he was a special kind of different, not the kind who congregated with his friends in hallways and parking lots discussing the feeblenesses of others. That was part of why I thought I could spend the rest of my life with him, the boy who became my best friend, the boy from a family where nobody gets divorced. I even thought I could spend the rest of my life with someone who listened to the Beatles too much.

I tried to grow to love them, I honestly did, but it never really happened. In those years, the late 70's, there was plenty of other music around: Peter Frampton, the Commodores, the soundtrack to "Mahogany." But my husband didn't listen to my songs; instead, I listened to his - every Beatles album over and over. I figured that's what true love was, when you loved someone even when he played too many Beatles records too many times.

When we heard the Beatles on the radio, I asked him why we bothered listening to them on the radio when we listened to their albums all the time. He said it was so we could hear them at the same time other people were hearing them. Even when we moved from Kansas to California in a U-haul, it was one Beatles track after the other. If it wasn't "Abbey Road," it was the White Album, and if it wasn't the White Album it was "Revolver." The volume kept going up and up every time the radio played one of his favorite Beatles songs, which were pretty much all of them.

I knew that I loved this man and wanted to spend the rest of my life with him. What I didn't know was that most things change after you marry your high school sweetheart. And for us, just about everything changed: our jobs or lack thereof, our apartments, our cars, our wall hangings, our haircuts, our arguments, our love. But my husband's love for the Beatles never changed.

A few days after George Harrison died, I said yes when a friend invited me upstate to her country house for the weekend. The guests would include a French friend we knew from the time we all lived in Paris. As we drove north to the Catskills, I said nothing about the letter tucked away in my backpack.

The last time the three of us had been together was in Paris, where our French friend still lived. He still had good looks and his sense of humor, he still talked with French seriousness, and he still called what he had H.I.V., although his legs called it AIDS. He walked as if he had no trouble putting one foot in front of the other, and when he fell, he stood up quickly, even when his legs begged him not to.

It was already another flawless weekend in the country. The first snow began to fall when the apples were still on their trees.

For 36 hours inside and outside the farmhouse, we talked about everything under stars that could actually be seen. I succeeded in keeping my Strawberry Fields dilemma to myself until we found ourselves in Black Horse Farms, a store

in the town of Athens, which is where my friends found me in the candle section, which is where they asked me why I was buying a single candle.

I finally told them about my ex-husband's letter and what he had asked me to do with it. I knew both of them well, and I figured I knew what their reaction would be, but I was wrong. They wanted to go with me. And so it was arranged that the three of us would stop at Central Park on the way back to the city.

As we drove south, we watched the sun go down. Then there was fog, then the park. When we arrived, I suggested that my friends wait in the car. But all our car doors opened as the mist was coming down. It was not quite nighttime, although the sun had set long before. Instead, there was a glow, a Central Park glow.

I was a little nervous. But there I was entering Central Park on behalf of my former family, my husband of 20 years ago, the sweet boy with whom I had planned my entire life, and there I was with two unlikely members of the unlikely family I had never thought about planning.

We continued forward, but because none of us had been there before, we didn't know what we were looking for. Finally we saw a few people, quiet souls, along with other letters and other candles that had been deposited in a place called Strawberry Fields, in the gray mosaic circle called Imagine.

The three of us walked around the circle together, wondering where the best place would be for my ex-husband's letter. Then they stepped back as I laid the letter on the circle of stones. We lighted the candle, stayed a moment or two, then turned to leave. To say we all said some kind of prayer might be an exaggeration, but there were thoughts. "My Sweet Lord" kind of thoughts.

As we left the park, above the light and the trees, we saw the same building in the same moment. The Dakota. The three of us continued walking, and the mist continued misting.

On our way home, we stopped at Times Square to buy some CD's. That night, we didn't talk as much as we listened. Other people listened with us too, and although I had listened to "Strawberry Fields" over and over before as an inexperienced lover, I must have heard it for the first time that night.

A few days later, I heard "Strawberry Fields" again on the radio. My ex-husband was right. It's better to hear something you love on the radio, because when you're listening, other people are listening too.

Johanna Baldwin's play "Adolph & Yolanda" will have its debut in London in the spring.