

The Holy Grail of pop memorabilia - will it ever be found?

by Rob Fennah

It is always difficult finding something new to say about the Fab Four; after all, hasn't everything already been written? Well no, not quite...

It's common knowledge the first instrument John Lennon ever learned to play was his mother's banjo. John gave many a heart-warming account of how his mother, Julia, spent hours teaching him to play Buddy Holly's classic, That'll Be The Day, "*sitting there with endless patience until I had worked out all the chords.*" It was Julia who turned John onto rock 'n' roll and actively encouraged him to pursue his musical ambitions much to the disapproval of his Aunt Mimi with whom he lived.

Julia Baird, John's half-sister, who witnessed their mother teaching him said: "*I can see John so clearly, concentrating intently on the mother of pearl backed banjo that belonged to his grandfather, who had brought it back from a sea trip and then left it to our mother.*" It's fair to say, therefore, that without Julia Lennon's banjo there wouldn't have been a Beatles and, *without them*, everything we know today would be different.

So where is the Holy Grail of pop memorabilia? Well that's what this is all about; shortly after Julia Lennon died in 1958 the banjo went missing and no one has set eyes on it since. Remarkably, neither John's family, nor any of the numerous Beatles experts, have been able to shed light on its whereabouts or what may have become of it. John never revealed what happened to the priceless relic and it remains the greatest mystery in pop music. However, one thing is certain; if it did resurface, the lucky finder would no longer have to worry about working for a living. In 2000, a Lennon piano went under the hammer at Sotheby's for 1.5 million pounds which gives some indication as to what the banjo might be worth. Some argue it would fetch millions more, not just because it was the first instrument the greatest rock 'n' roll legend learned to play; it was the catalyst that changed the world!

But before we all start searching our attics and cellars, we must first overcome a major problem. Other than being banjo-shaped, what does the illusive instrument actually look like? Does it have any distinguishing marks or features; something to confirm its provenance? There are no photographs of John playing the banjo so how could it be authenticated? Julia Baird's description does provide us with a couple of important clues; the banjo originated from overseas, circa 1930s, and it had a mother of pearl back. Research suggests this decorative feature only appeared on expensive banjos and helps rule out the notion that it might have been scrapped (beautiful old instruments are seldom destroyed and are kept for their aesthetic and ornamental value). More importantly, a mother of pearl inlay is rare and drastically reduces the list of possibilities by eliminating those banjos that don't possess it. That said, it would still leave numerous contenders to choose from and that's where the search would inevitably grind to a halt. Or would it?

Alright, so John Lennon's signature might not be emblazoned across it but with today's forensic technology it would certainly be possible to confirm provenance if John or Julia had left behind, say, a fingerprint or perhaps a strand of hair. Although this idea may seem a little far-fetched, it is not as outlandish as it sounds. Lennon's Gallotone Champion acoustic guitar was authenticated, prior to its sale at Sotheby's in 1999, by a drop of his blood! Original Quarrymen member, Rod Davis, recounts: *"John took the skin off the edge of his index finger while playing at St Peter's Parish Fête in Woolton (1957). I remember seeing the bloodstain inside Lennon's guitar while I was changing one of the strings. When Sotheby's contacted me about authentication I told them about it and, although faint, the bloodstain was still there."*

The mystery surrounding Lennon's missing banjo is still relatively unknown but as the news filters out no doubt hundreds will crawl out of the woodwork claiming to possess it. Could it still be out there having been stashed away for safe keeping and then forgotten about? Of course it could; that's what happens with memorabilia; hey, we've all watched the Antiques Roadshow!

So, with that in mind, let's raise a glass to Julia, John and the banjo that made it all possible. Without them, the world would have been a much quieter place.

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