

## **A brief insight into the facts behind the fiction**

*by Rob Fennah*

*“The very first tune I ever learned to play was ‘That’ll Be The Day’. My mother taught it to me on the banjo, sitting there with endless patience until I managed to work out all the chords” --- JOHN LENNON*

A few years ago I attended a Beatles Convention with Allan Williams, the group’s first manager, infamously known as ‘The Man Who Gave The Beatles Away’. Throughout the day I watched as Beatles memorabilia changed hands for huge amounts and commented how amazed I was by the relentless interest in a band that twanged its last chord over four decades ago.

The subject soon got around to pop memorabilia, in particular, a piano formerly owned by John Lennon which fetched a cool one and a half million pounds at a Sotheby’s auction. As Allan and I argued about the morality of spending such an insane amount on a piano, a dealer listening in to our conversation perked up:

*“That’s nothing compared to what Julia’s banjo would fetch!”*

The dealer went on to tell me how Lennon’s mother, Julia, introduced her son to the world of music by teaching him to play Buddy Holly’s classic, ‘That’ll Be The Day’ on her banjo.

*“So where is the first instrument the greatest rock ‘n’ roll legend ever learned to play - the catalyst that changed the world?” I asked.*

*“Missing”, the dealer replied, “and has been for 60 years”.*

That should have been the end of the story, but a couple of weeks later my interest in Julia’s banjo was re-kindled when a news report told how a lucky bargain hunter had bought an old suitcase at a car-boot sale for fifteen pounds. When it was opened it was found to contain a priceless collection of Beatles memorabilia. How it ended up in a car-boot sale nobody knows. Then, within days of this discovery, a Hofner guitar was found in the loft of John’s old home in Menlove Avenue, Liverpool. This prompted the six million dollar question: Is it possible Julia’s banjo could still be out there too, just waiting to be found?

After interviewing several Beatles experts on the subject, including Lennon's half-sister, Julia Baird, I was amazed to hear that everything the dealer had told me at the Beatles Convention was true.

The banjo went missing shortly after Julia Lennon was killed in a car accident; an event that haunted John for the rest of his life. In later years he immortalised her in his songs, 'Julia' and 'Mother'. I think it's fair to assume that the banjo she left behind, the only physical link John had left of her, must have been close to his heart. Indeed, further research revealed that Lennon not only talked about Julia's banjo many times during interviews, it was also the subject matter of his opening statement in The Beatles Anthology.

*"So, where would one start looking for the holy grail of pop memorabilia?"* I asked Julia Baird jokingly, adding that; *"perhaps John hid it somewhere?"*

Julia pondered over what I'd said for a moment, looked me straight in the eye and replied: *"Do you know something; after our mum died, that's just the sort of thing John would have done"*.

*"Wow!"* I thought, *"What a great idea for a novel!"*

