

**The Alchemical Wedding at the Royal Albert Hall – John & Yoko, Bagism, and the Naked Lady**  
**18th December 1968. - 55th year anniversary – 12/13/23**

1968, what a year. Vietnam, Nixon, Woodstock, Altamont, and in December, in London, the Alchemical Wedding to top it all off! I was eighteen and reveling in the post-1967 Flower Power revolution emanating from San Francisco, and which had spread to the streets of London where I gingerly walked barefoot and be-fringed to happenings and festivals.

It was mid-December, and Rich Abrash, an American friend from New York, showed up for a visit. Rich was studying anthropology in Paris to avoid the US draft. My friend Jeffrey Schwarz and I had met Rich in Paris in June, when the cobblestone streets were still torn up from the rioting students of May. He'd got word that an event called "The Alchemical Wedding" was going to happen, at The Royal Albert Hall of all places!

The London Arts Lab had booked and organized the event (under the supposed official respectable auspices of Leonard Cohen), and many of the young artists, intelligentsia and hippnessians of London had planned a wild underground hippie showcase for the alternative arts and music community of the time. Posters had been designed by The Arts Lab, and full-page ads appeared in the main underground newspapers *International Times* (IT) and *Oz*.

The Arts Lab, housed in a Dickensian building on Drury Lane in Central London, was then *the* magnet for British counterculture. Founded by Jim Haynes, Hoppy Hopkins, and American activist Jack Moore, along with a street theatre group the Human Family, The Lab provided a space for any type of Art, including experimental theater, dance, art, film, music, and street performance.

On any given day you might wander in and see David Bowie rehearsing dance moves, or John Lennon popping in to see how his arts patronage was faring. Jeffrey and I used to go to the Drury Lane Arts Lab quite often during 1967 and 1968, as the food and drink was inexpensive, and the shows were cool and mostly free.

As we took our seats in the Royal Albert Hall on December 18th, we could see that word of the event must have gotten out quite well, as the place looked close to four thousand holes full. Fashions ranged from grubby denims to outlandish and colourful hippy garb. Cigarette smoke, and an occasional whiff of hash wafted through the hall, along with a good dose of patchouli incense. Jeffrey and I were on the lower level, in the middle of a row, about eight rows from the front, stage right. Rich's ticket took him elsewhere.

Our "Beatle senses" kicked into immediate high gear, when we espied John Lennon and Yoko Ono, both dressed in dark clothing, with Lennon in a denim jacket, taking their seats below us to the left, in the well of the main floor. A seat neighbour pointed out Ken Kesey and some of his Merry Band, were sitting with the iconic couple.

Most regular entertainment events have an Emcee who holds the show together with banter and jokes. Not this one! Without any preamble, Jack Moore went out into the middle of the empty

main floor and started a curious ritual: The house lights went down, leaving a single spotlight picking him out. He stood facing the stage, and slowly brought his hands up to his ears, and held them in the cupped position, that's usually associated with helping humans to hear sounds better. Up to this point, the audience had been talking amongst themselves, but his display calmed and quieted the audience within seconds. He stayed still for a couple of minutes and then pivoted ninety degrees and continued his posture in that direction. He then completed the compass circle back to facing the stage. Apparently, that was the beginning of the show.

After a few minutes of silence, the event was woken up when a chant of "Om," was projected out to the hall by Janaki from the Hare Krishnas. In those years the Hare Krishna movement was mixed in with the underground scene, along with the Pranksters, Jesus Freaks, and Hells Angels. The dancing, chanting, orange-clad Krishnas were a ubiquitous sight on the streets and at public gatherings. This event was no exception, and they had been consigned by the Arts Lab to bring the proceedings together with their chants, bells, singing, and group silence.

Janaki then stepped into a spotlight on a side aisle and sung out "Haribol!" (Chant the name of the lord). At this signal, the whole saffron-swathed contingent from the Hare Krishna Temple stepped forward from all around the circular hall and started a raucous chant and drumming as they descended the aisles to the main floor. The crowd took up their chanting, and the whole place became a joyous cacophony that continued for about fifteen minutes; the show had begun in earnest.

A couple of unknown bands came on to warm up the proceedings. One, was called "Starlight" a somewhat proto-glam rock band, quite surprising for these hippy proceedings. The Third Ear Band, who performed at all the hippy music festivals, rescued the musical end of the show with their poor-man's Incredible String Band-like creations.

Well, a Beatle was present, so, were we going to get a cool music jam with John and surprise guests? A poetry reading? We got a show. Not quite what we all expected I hazard, but I have a feeling, knowing Yoko Ono's art premise, I can fully understand her intent in retrospect.

John and Yoko got up from their seats and walked onto the stage. At the front of the stage, Yoko produced a large white canvas bag with a string looped top enclosure. Yoko opened the top wide, slowly stepped in the bag, sat down, and pulled the cloth up, enclosing her within the bag. Then John opened the bag wide and stepped in to join her with both sitting cross-legged, facing each other in the bag. Yoko reached up and pulled the string tight, until the top was sealed closed. The birth of Bagism. (John name-checks Bagism at the beginning of "Give Peace a Chance"). During their performance, they sat still inside the bag for at least half an hour, with just an occasional shift of position.

During the show a protestor ran to the base of the stage, holding a banner about the British government's involvement in the Nigerian-Biafran civil war. The protestor screamed "Do you care, John Lennon? Do you care?" before he was led away by staff.

The crowd was of course nonplussed by this unexpected still life, and at first were respectfully quiet, waiting for something to happen, but when it became obvious that they were not going to do "something," the audience started shouting out all sorts of wry comments at the solitary bag on the stage.

There's one specific comment I do remember. Someone shouted out "I've got blisters on my fingers!" which got quite a laugh, as *The Beatles White Album*, had recently been released. (at the end of *Helter-Skelter*). Yoko must have wanted this very thing to happen, considering her proclivity for performance art, by turning the art on the audience to complete. Even the other performers were confused. Poet/flautist Neil Oram and other members of the Third Ear Band were not sure what to do in this lacuna, so during the bag sojourn they puttered around on stage with bicycles and occasionally played their instruments in haphazard ways.

Finally, the most famous couple in the world at that time climbed out of the bag, and to loud applause and a few jeers went back to their seats down below us. According to a description by Yoko, she was inspired to create "Bagism" by *The Little Prince* and its theme: "The essential is invisible to the eye." She said by staying hidden, the force of what they are saying will not be misinterpreted by physical appearance.

Then Elizabeth Marsh, a blonde, young lady from Texas, whose seat was on the aisle one row behind us, was so taken by the event she took all her clothes off and sat there naked. Audience members noticed what she had done, and a buzz went around our seating area. After all, this was The Royal Albert Hall: What would Queen Victoria think? This occurrence was also noticed by one of the two policemen at the top of the aisle. The older sergeant sent a young constable down the steps to confront the woman. The hapless bobby did his best to convince her to put her clothes back on, but she was having none of it. The constable, needing reinforcements against a naked lady, then went back up the aisle, and came back with his sergeant.

The local audience had been watching these events closely, and when the sergeant grabbed the naked lady by the arm and tried to pull her to her feet repeatedly, she resisted, and about a hundred of us got up and closely surrounded and jostled the policemen. The constables' helmet went flying, of course. The police looked around and realized they were stranded amongst some very angry drug-crazed hippies and got quite visibly panicked. They let Ms. Marsh go, and retreated up the aisle, with the ridicule of the crowd ringing in their ears, and the constables' helmet crowd-surfing the hall. The naked lady settled back in her seat to enjoy the rest of the show unbothered.

As the event stumbled to an inchoate end, and the lights came up, Jeffrey noticed that John and Yoko didn't head backstage but had begun to walk up the notorious aisle next to the naked lady. We quickly shuffled past the others still seated in our row and got to the aisle just as John and Yoko were passing. We were walking side by side with John and Yoko! We walked with them up the aisle and turned right onto the main concourse towards the vomitorium of the Royal Albert Hall. Their psychedelic-painted Rolls-Royce was parked directly outside, and we accompanied

them down the stairs to their car door. As we walked, we just chatted with them and asked some quite puerile questions.

The next day all the major newspapers had the headline theme of “Hippies Overrun Venerable Albert Hall” with pictures of the “Naked Lady” incident, and descriptions of attendees “beating up policemen.” As to John and Yoko’s Bagism, the press did not, or didn’t want to understand it, and ridiculed the event.

The management of the Royal Albert Hall made sure to inform the producers that they would not be welcomed back to the venerable establishment under any circumstances.