

(interview)

sean lennon

Devastation, Perspective, Beauty

A haunted heart opens, a
sore soul soars on *Friendly Fire*

By **Shane Kite**



Sean Lennon's self-produced second solo effort, *Friendly Fire* (October/Capitol), a lushly arranged aria of image-rich vignettes in the vein of Elliott Smith, documents a harrowing year in which Lennon was dealt two of life's

worst blows in consecutive, compounding fashion. After finding out his best friend, Max LeRoy, had been having an affair with his then girlfriend, Bijou Phillips, Lennon turned to writing songs in response to the betrayal. When LeRoy died in a motorcycle accident later in 2005, sentiment turned on its head; Lennon was devastated.

Friends since boyhood, the two never reconciled. Transmuting pain became a matter of survival: He ended up making 10 short films with director Michele Civetta to accompany each song on *Friendly Fire*, for which Lennon wrote the storylines and acted in, along with a bevy of high-profile friends—Lindsay Lohan, Carrie Fisher, Harper Simon and Phillips, who sings backing vocals on the track “Spectacle.” Perspective: Lennon says the two remain friends. He spoke to us by phone from a London hotel room prior to heading to Belgium for a second leg of a European tour in support of the record.

Nikki Style: *There's such a warm, intriguing atmosphere overall on Friendly Fire. The piano intro on "Dead Meat" puts one in the mind of a film, snow coming down and some type of tracking shot low to the ground.*

Sean Lennon: Yeah, that was definitely the idea. Like Eric Satie. He's a French composer who wrote a song that's very famous called “Les Trois Gymnopédie.” It's kind of the essence, the peak of what I consider to be aesthetically pleasing, musically. Actually, I have the song on my laptop if you want to hear it, because I think you'll know it as soon as you hear it. Hold on one second... where is it?... [pauses to bring up the song]

SL: Have you ever heard that?

NS: *Sounds beautiful.*

SL: It's actually been used in *Another Woman*, the Woody Allen film.

NS: *I was going to mention him regarding the films you've made for the disc. Your storylines and acting seem very much in that vein.*

SL: They're actually a nod to Woody Allen, a lot of those scenes. The whole film thing was—I kind of just wanted to give nods to all the filmmakers that I love. From like [Luis] Buñuel [surrealist Spanish filmmaker], you know [starts laughing], to like [Stanley] Kubrick, a la Barry Lyndon, and Woody Allen's *Annie Hall*. I was kind of referencing all those things that I love, basically just because I had a chance to. It was fun.

NS: *The record addresses some very personal recent events in your life. Did you find catharsis in making this record, in writing down what you were experiencing, or in singing these songs?*

SL: It was almost a matter of survival. It was a very, very difficult time. I had to make art or else I would have gone crazy I think. It's helpful to be able to sing your heart out, literally, you know? It's an ongoing process.

NS: *There's been eight years between your first solo effort, Into the Sun and Friendly Fire. Yet you've been busy in between in the avant-garde downtown scene in Manhattan, working with John Zorn, Thurston Moore and playing in bands like Deltron 3030, Soulfly, and Cibo Matto.*

SL: Yeah, I play music constantly, but it's funny, people think that somehow I was sitting on the couch this whole time. But you know, a solo record is a very specific kind of thing. But I produce. I do gigs all the time in New York.

NS: *Are certain songs a buzz to play live?*

SL: It's all sounding great. I know that sounds silly, but they're all important in their own way to me. But the two that are the most fun to play at this point might be “Falling Out of Love” and “Would I Be the One.” I get to rock out to “Would I Be the One” on the guitar in the end, which is fun.

NS: *How do you feel about your evolution as an artist in terms of how people tend to view you by dint of your lineage, as the son of John Lennon and Yoko Ono, and the place you hold for them in that continual comparative light?*

SL: I always knew that I had a specific taste and aesthetics melodically that weren't my father's, or anyone else's for that matter. I think the more records I make, the more clear that'll be. When my first record came out, a lot of people said I was searching for my sound because I was playing so many different genres. I'm always searching for how to make better art but not

necessarily identity.

NS: *There's a conventional wisdom that says sons and daughters of artists in the folk tradition have it easier, like the Wainwrights, for example [the lauded New York-based singer-songwriters Rufus and Martha Wainwright, children of folksingers Loudon Wainwright III and Kate McGarrigle]. Whereas if one is in the pop or rock genre it's made all the tougher?*

SL: But I think the Wainwrights are doing well because they're just so fucking genius. But I mean at the same time, there's not a prejudice against, you know, Rufus making music so much, because frankly, most people don't even know his dad's music, you know? It's different when you're talking about the Beatles or [Bob] Marley, because it's so fucking massively in the sub-collective unconscious of modern society that people can't forget it, you know what I mean? But the Wainwrights are making it because they're the real deal.

NS: *As are you.*

SL: Thank you!

NS: *You've said your mother is very sweet, but that she'll tell you very frankly right away what she thinks is good or bad artistically. What a great atmosphere to grow up in: Your benchmark must be set so high?*

SL: Yeah [laughs]. She has no qualms about being totally honest, which is great. I'm thankful to have had her as an influence on me in terms of exploring multiple art, different media instead of just doing music and thinking that's all you can do. She's always shown me by example that you can paint and you can make films and you can make music all at the same time, and as long as you have a good concept, then the products will be good. You don't necessarily have to be a filmmaker to make a good film, as long as you have a good idea. That's what conceptual art means. The idea is where the art takes place. So the medium is just...is secondary. That's what I believe to this day.

NS: *It seems you're really focused yet taking great pleasure in performing these songs?*

SL: Yeah, I'm really enjoying being immersed in the music I'm making right now. It's been like a 24-hour thing rehearsing and playing for months and months now. You know what I do when I get back to my room? I open up my little computer, go to the classical section, press play, and then run a bath, you know what I mean? That's all I do [starts laughing]. I'd like to see the Borat film. I'm a huge fan. Sacha [Baron] Cohen is a genius, no question. He's taking that Andy Kaufman, reality-blur thing and combining the master acting abilities of Peter Sellers and creating something else altogether.

NS: *So will it be eight years between solo efforts again?*

SL: Well, I'm not really good at planning. It's not my forté. But I will say it's been a much more pleasant experience this time, so I think it's going to make me want to do it more...a lot more. It's a really good time in my life, considering. I mean honestly, it's the best I've had so far, just being able to really get into it and play my music for people. It's the thing I enjoy most.

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