

John Lennon, the FBI and me

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Now that the documents on the former Beatle have been released, I can understand why the information was classified.

After a 25-year legal battle, the UCLA historian, Jon Wiener has managed to secure the final 10 documents relating to the surveillance of John Lennon that the FBI were refusing to release.

I am absolutely delighted to read that J Edgar Hoover sent a memo to Nixon's bagman, HR Haldeman, informing him that Lennon was sympathetic to "extreme leftwing activities in Britain". This was hardly a secret to anyone in Britain at the time since the interview Robin Blackburn and myself conducted with Lennon was published as a supplement in The Red Mole. Photographs of John and Yoko wearing Red Mole T-shirts appeared on the cover of Ramparts magazine in the states (aficionados can see one of them on the cover of the new edition of my book Streetfighting Years: An Autobiography of the Sixties, which also contains the interview). What else? The released "secret" document says:

"... Lennon implied he was sympathetic towards IMG which is a small Trotskyist group which owes allegiance to the United Secretariat of the Fourth International."

This is accurate. Did Hoover explain to Haldeman why it was the United Secretariat rather than the International Committee or was that briefing so secret that it could not be put down on paper? Possibly. But now for something truly sensational:

"Immediately after it was published in Red Mole, Ali and Blackburn set about selling the interview to papers in western Europe, and about £700 was realised from the sale of the rights of reproduction and these were retained by the International Marxist Group, presumably with Lennon's agreement."

Guilty as charged, though I'd forgotten that we only got £700, a clear indication that business skills were not our strong point even then. Anything else? Wait for this gem:

"It is believed that Lennon promised to advance sums of money to the IMG in order to finance the establishment of a leftwing bookshop and reading room in London. Despite a long courtship by Blackburn and Ali, as far as we know, no sum has been paid by Lennon for this purpose to them."

Now I understand the reason for classifying this information. They were tapping our phones (and since Blackburn and I had lengthy conversations every day on various matters it would be wonderful if MI5 sent us the tapes just as a record of that period and a gesture of goodwill). The information itself is not inaccurate. I certainly had come up with the idea of a big leftwing bookshop. It was to be called The Red Apple and have a large reading-room and cafe (on the Viennese model) attached to it. Both John and Yoko were keen on the project and it might have happened had they not left for New York. It remains a good idea. Any takers?

P.S.

* From the Guardian.