

Though long respected in the art world, Yoko Ono has had to battle to be taken seriously as a musician. Her latest release, *Between My Head And The Sky*, is at last winning the 76 year old the kind of acclaim many would say is overdue. It's taken a lifetime, literally, but the world is finally ready for Yoko Ono.

by Sarah Illingworth  
Photography by Charlotte Muhal and Sean Lennon © Yoko Ono 2009



A spotlight locks onto the tiny, black-clad artist as she scuttles onstage and opens her sold out show at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM, New York) with an a cappella piece. The audience is immediately transfixed. We're there to see Yoko's latest album, *Between My Head And The Sky*, brought to life - not only by her and the newest incarnation of the Plastic Ono Band - but by members of the original ensemble, as well as the likes of Paul Simon, Bette Midler, the Scissor Sisters and Kim Gordon and Thurston Moore from Sonic Youth.

Essentially serving as a tribute to Yoko, the show is orchestrated by her son to John Lennon, Sean Ono Lennon. Video footage from the family's early life together is shown, along with some of Yoko's better known art installations - among them *Bottoms* (1966) and *Fly* (1970). Held two days before her 77th birthday, the show proves Yoko's star is still burning strong. Expressing herself through a crazy variety of animal like cries and calls, any timidity vanishes when she performs - she becomes something fierce.

It's a transformation Sean mulled over when I met him at his Greenwich Village apartment, also home to his record label Chimera Music.

"She really has this thing where she has no

inhibitions and she's completely unselfconscious onstage. There's only about 20 people that I've ever seen, really, who are at her level of personal freedom onstage. She just comes alive. As soon as she walks out there she just enters this zone that's an alternate sort of realm, where she's completely transported by what she's doing."

It's a freedom that is also clear when listening to *Between...*, which Sean produced, arranged and has released through Chimera. Though he's put a lot into the project, the album may never have happened if Yoko had not jumped in on one of his. The younger Lennon had produced a taster compilation to showcase other artists on the label. After giving it to his mum to listen to, he received a letter in return.

"She wrote me this letter that was very serious," says Sean, "she can get very serious - and she said, 'look, it's very good, everything's very good. But, you know, all of you are very soft and subtle. It's one soft song after another - and by the third soft song you just don't want to know. It's too much soft, you need some fire. You need some fire - this is rock and roll. And you know what? I was just thinking, 'how are you going to get some fire?' and then I flashed in front of my face. And I realised that the fire is me."

Sean was immediately excited at the prospect

of working with Yoko - if a little stressed out.

"She said, 'I want to go into the studio tomorrow.' And it was one o'clock in the afternoon. She's like, 'get me a studio, and get me musicians.' I had no band for her, I had nothing planned, and we were mixing the EP in three days. So it was this really last minute, panicked thing."

The two recordings that came out of that session, 'Ask The Elephant' and 'Calling', not only feature on the Chimera EP, they also sparked plans for another project.

"Once we started recording, it was so good that it was obvious that we had to make a full album," says Sean. "And that's when I said, 'Mom, if we're going to put out a record on Chimera, I really love the name Plastic Ono Band....It really was more about the sound of the name. I really just think it's such a cool band name.'"

Before *Between...* the last album to wear the Plastic Ono Band moniker was *Shaved Fish* in 1975, a collection of John Lennon's singles as a solo artist. It's a name he and Yoko both credited on their solo work and collaborations.

"In the beginning I was not sure," says Yoko when I meet with her at an apartment she and John once shared in Soho. "I had to delve into my memory and say, 'why did I stop [using] the title





Plastic Ono Band?" It was always John Lennon Plastic Ono Band too. We were using that. When he passed away, [I think I] just blocked it."

An ever-evolving outfit that has previously included the likes of Eric Clapton, Jim Keltner and Klaus Voormann (all of whom performed at the BAM show), Plastic Ono Band is no easy act to cast. As well as Sean, for Between... Ono chose to work with Japanese experimental act Cornelius and Cibo Matto's Yuka Honda. Cornelius flew out to New York and the record was completed in six days.

"She just is really fast, the way she works," says Sean of Yoko. "She just usually comes in, she has an idea, she has a lyric, and then I have three minutes to come up with an arrangement, and we just go. In one day we did six songs, and that was the record...she likes to go quick."

But not at the sacrifice of quality. Between My Head And The Sky is - as one critic dubbed it, a "fantastically cool, fearlessly weird" mix of dance, punk and piano led poetry. Though she likes to work fast, Yoko recalls being irritated when Sean pushed her to record another track on her birthday.

"Sean said, 'oh, please write another song.' I said, 'why? Why? We did it, we did it today.' I was

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-Yoko Ono-

Yoko agrees.

"It was great, you know, because he understands me so well. So that I didn't have to explain, you know? I think that it went very well because of that...I can just be a little more intuitive [working with him]."

Though he admits to moments of feeling, "like a grumpy 12 year old," when the group toured together ("give me three days alone with my mom and I start to talk like I'm going through puberty

the John Lennon legacy at times.

"I think music always represented my father to me, so my whole desire to play music was definitely a result of feeling like I wanted to get closer to him," he confesses. "But then also, I do think it might have been psychologically hard in a way, because...I actually feel like I'm doing pretty well in the grand scheme of things, and I think it is a little bit stifling, because you just never have the opportunity to feel like you're the



very upset that he would...sort of...mess up my work, you know. And he never did that, so...I'm like, 'why would you say that to me? And then he was saying, 'no no no, please, please.' I said, 'what is this? I don't understand, he's so different today.'"

Excitedly, she explains that Sean had a reason:

"Then Yuka [Honda] called out, [from] the room in the way back, said, 'the pipe broke and somebody has to come and help us.' I was saying, 'do I have to take care of a pipe as well?' So I just went [in] there, and then suddenly there were like, 20 people, all standing and, [sings] 'happy birthday to you,' and there's a huge cake, with candles and everything. I was like, 'oh, oh ok. It's my birthday, oh alright.'"

Asked what it was like to work so closely with his mother, Sean says, "I actually feel like I was in a really good position to know how best to make everything go smoothly. I'm close to her as a friend, as her son, and I really know her music. So it's perfect. I can make her feel comfortable, and when she is about to say something, I already know what she's about to say. When she's about to feel something I already know what she's about to feel. So I think that's why it worked so fast."

or something"), Sean says he's grateful to have the kind of connection he does with his mum.

"I realise that I could just have a relationship with my mother where I meet her once a week for lunch or something and we talk and say hi and that's it," he explains, "[but] with my mom I get to perform and write songs and work and, you know, argue about the mix and the level of the hi hat in the mix. It's a more dynamic relationship than most people get. So I feel lucky for that."

More than a chance to spend time with his mother, Sean has also valued the opportunity to work with someone he so admires artistically.

"I am such a big fan of her work, honestly - and I think that I am unbiased in my love of her work. I think that I would love it the same if she wasn't my mom. She's really influenced me a lot."

That Sean dotes on his mother is clear throughout the show at BAM. He is at once host, performer and protector - a watchful eye on Yoko as she shrieks and groans her way through songs from Between My Head And The Sky, along with some of her older material. Though being his father's son has obviously also impacted his own musicality, Sean admits to feeling the pressure of

greatest, or like you're entitled to some sort of [sense of achievement. You have to] really figure out where your pleasure is, you know, from doing music."

It's clear Yoko's pleasure comes from the raw beauty of self-expression, whether it be through music, or art or any other forum. Though her endless creative and philanthropic efforts must, like Sean's, come from a desire to keep John's memory alive, throughout their relationship she was as much an inspiration to him as he was to her. 'Artist' is more than a role she plays. It's who she is through and through, and it has been throughout her life.

Add to that activist and undying optimist and you start to get a picture of who Yoko is at her core. When she advises her audience at BAM, "don't get too angry, or too depressed!" - as though it really were that simple - it strikes that, if anyone has reason to be angry or depressed, it's Yoko. Yet there she is, almost 80 and still dancing and singing and wishing the world would give peace a chance.

*Between My Head And The Sky is out now. ✖*