

The Making of *John Lennon Sketchbook*

Independent filmmaker John Canemaker gives his first-hand account of working with Yoko Ono and developing a short animated film of John Lennon's personal drawings.

By John Canemaker

As an independent animator, I consider myself fortunate whenever a film job comes to me by means of personal recommendation or word-of-mouth. One of the most joyous and fulfilling projects of my career came about through the strange coincidence of two remarkable women, living on opposite sides of the globe, having the same first name. Here is a log of my experiences leading up to, and including the making of, the animated short *John Lennon Sketchbook*.

August 17, 1985. I arrive in Hiroshima, the Japanese city destroyed 40 years ago by the first atomic bomb. This city, now completely rebuilt and dedicated to world peace, is at once a warning of the dangers of our age and a symbol of the resilience of the human spirit. For one week, Hiroshima hosts Japan's first International Animation Film Festival, and I am one of several guest animators invited to show my films.

After nearly 20 hours in flight, I hover between alertness and exhaustion. At Hiroshima airport, a large contingent of festival officials, staff members, local news TV cameras, and exploding flashbulbs meet the foreign animators.

Blinded and confused, I gladly take refuge in a waiting limousine, with antimacassar-topped seats and a white-gloved driver. Next to the chauffeur is a small, dark-haired woman in a white dress; she turns and says in crisp English, "Hello. My name is Yoko Ninomiya. I am your interpreter."

In my semi-groggy state, I attempt some conversation with this complete stranger, taking note of her name. "Yoko, eh? Well, I live in New York near someone named Yoko, who is very well known."

Ms. Ninomiya turns around in an instant. "You mean the famous Yoko Ono?" she says. "Do you know her?"

"Not exactly," I answer. "But she does live a couple of blocks from me, in the Dakota Apartments, and I see her all the time in the

neighborhood. I used to see her and John Lennon, too, before his death."

"Have you ever spoken to her?" my interpreter asks.

"No. I think of her as my neighbor, and being a good neighbor, I would never disturb her privacy by talking with her or asking for an autograph."

"Oh," replies Yoko Ninomiya, and turns to the front.

(Months later, she would write me regarding the origin and meaning of her given name, Yoko: "When I was born my parents wished me to become a broad-minded person, [as broad-minded as] the Pacific Ocean. So they named me Ocean Child. And I like my first name very much. I take pride in it.")

December 28, 1985. A Christmas card arrives enclosed in an envelope labeled "Starpeace Yoko Ono." A record advertisement, I assume. But no—on one side of the card a green-blue earth floats in a sky of cumulus clouds as a rainbow forms the word "Imagine." Near the bottom is hand-written "To John, Love, Yoko and Sean. Xmas '85 NYC."

And on the opposite side of the card is this hand-written message: "Dear John—I have received a letter from Yoko in Hiroshima who speaks of your kindness in protecting our privacy. Thank you. Y."

I am completely surprised by this personal greeting from Yoko Ono and her young son, Sean. Weeks later, Yoko of Hiroshima wrote me a letter explaining how and why she contacted Yoko of New York City.

On December 8, 1985, when I stopped into the Star Building on my way home from SHINNYO-EN, a Buddhism [sic] temple, I found LIFE [magazine] (Nov. '85) there. And I read a report on Strawberry Fields [a portion of New York's Central Park restored with financial aid from Yoko Ono] and I saw the pictures of Yoko and Sean. While I was looking at the pictures I felt like writing to them. I wrote a letter in Japanese and a Christmas card in English...

December 8 is an anniversary of both John Lennon [his death] and Buddha. I promised Yoko Ono that I would pray especially for the late John Lennon on that day from now on every year.

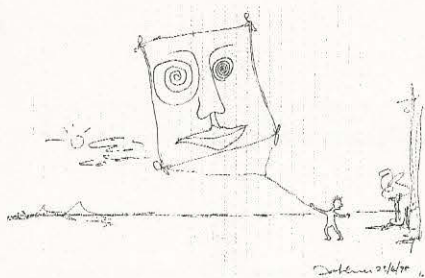
On January 5th, a film concert of the Beatles was held in the Peace Park... When I got home that day, a New Year's card from Yoko and Sean was waiting for me... written both in Japanese and English...

Well, John, I want to thank you very much for giving me information about Yoko Ono. I have been interested in her. Thanks to your help, I was able to communicate with her. It is wonderful that heart reaches heart.

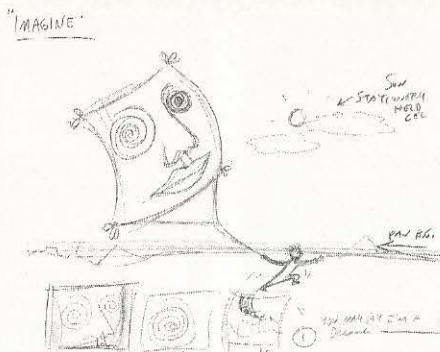
Around Christmas, the news of a 107-year-old Japanese man robbed of his money for medical care at his apartment in New York was shocking to me... But my heart was warmed to hear the news that Yoko Ono gave \$1000 to the lamentable old man. I trust Yoko Ono is a very sensitive person.

... I pray for her, too. In the morning and evening chanting, I pray for persons whom I wish to be happier and the victims of the A-bomb [Ms. Ninomiya's father is a survivor of the Hiroshima nuclear attack] and my ancestors every day. You can count on me. I can feel spirit. Though I did not talk with you much at the animation festival, I felt your soul.

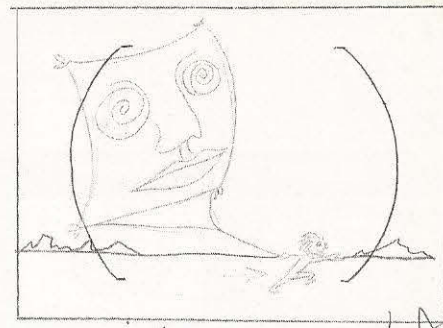
December 31, 1985. I write a letter to Yoko Ono explaining how this Hiroshima connection came about. In closing, I mention that I have recently sent letters to various playwrights and composers stating my opinion that the only way animation can fulfill its enormous potential for communication and artistry is if high caliber artists of all disciplines conceive projects specifically for the medium of animated film. I suggest that if she is interested in discussing the "imaginative possibilities of animation," I would be interested in talking with her.



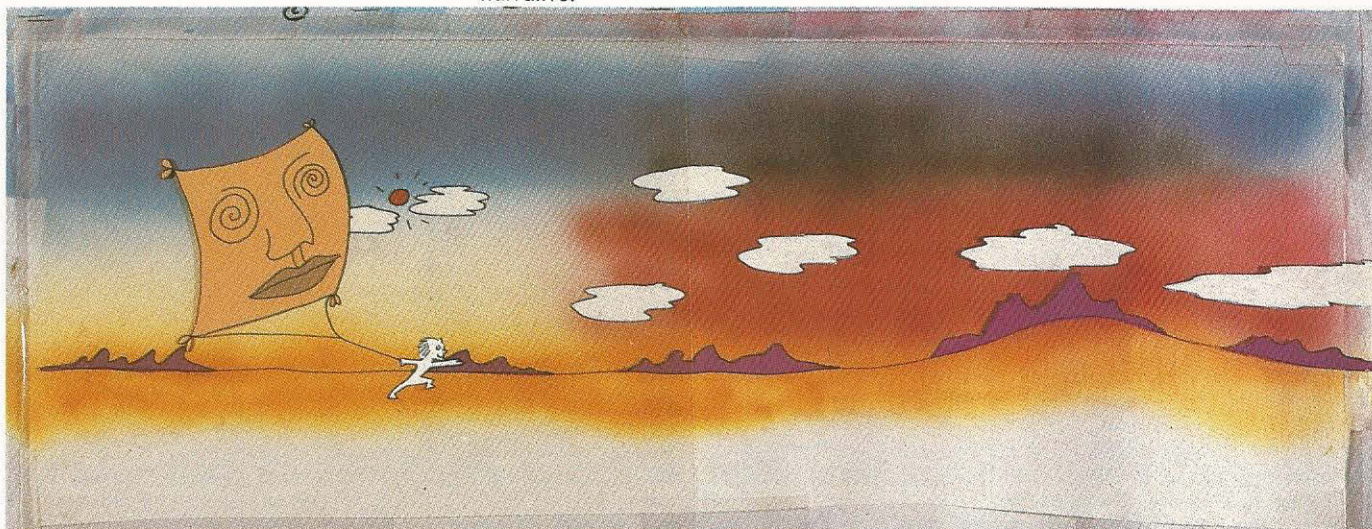
1. A Xerox of an original John Lennon drawing, a nude man with a kite containing a large face. The spontaneous sketch was drawn with felt-tip pen on lined yellow note paper (a.k.a. legal bond).



2. Rough story sketch by John Canemaker of suggested action for the animated film section using the man-with-a-kite drawing. The ideas—a pan background, the kite coming close to the screen and “wiping” over into the next scene—were incorporated into the final production storyboard, which served as a blueprint for the animated narrative.



3. A layout drawing made after storyboard approval and prior to animation. The layout gives the animator the size of the characters, their position within the frame, and other information necessary before making the drawing come alive.



4. The final setup of cels and painted background ready for the camera. The background has been airbrushed and is a long, rectangular shape, because it will “pan,” or move under the camera from right to left. The purple mountains are painted onto a long cel attached to the background on paper, because the mountains and clouds will also pan (or travel) under the camera.

The character with the kite is painted onto a cel and will remain in place for two frames, until changed with a dozen other cels with a similar but slightly changed pose. The final result on screen will be of a man pulling a large kite as he races across a desert island.

First Meeting

January 4, 1986. A phone call this Saturday from Studio One, Yoko Ono's office at the Dakota. Sam Havadtoy, Ms. Ono's projects coordinator, would like to meet with me Monday afternoon to view my sample reel and to discuss an animated film using drawings by John Lennon.

January 6, 1986. Sam Havadtoy, a boyish Hungarian in his thirties, ushers me from the ground floor office to a quiet apartment on a higher floor of the Dakota. It is, in my experience, the most beautiful apartment I have ever entered. We remove our shoes before stepping onto the thick white carpet and walk through corridors whose walls are hung with art from all periods, from a Warhol portrait of Sean to 13th century Japanese paintings. An Egyptian sarcophagus stands in a living room with a magnificent view of Central Park (and Strawberry Fields) and midtown Manhattan.

We settle in the large, comfortable kitch-

en area on leather couches near a complete sound and video console. Except for a man polishing the woodwork and three fluffy Persian cats wandering about, Sam and I are alone in the grand apartment.

After viewing my tapes and carefully scanning my portfolio, he shows a video credit roll from the end of a 1985 British docu-drama about John Lennon's life. After the last credit, a green, four-legged head waddles to center-screen and blinks. “That was animated from one of John's hundreds of cartoon characters,” says Sam. “It got us thinking we would like to make a test film to see if others of his drawings could be animated. Do you think you could do it?”

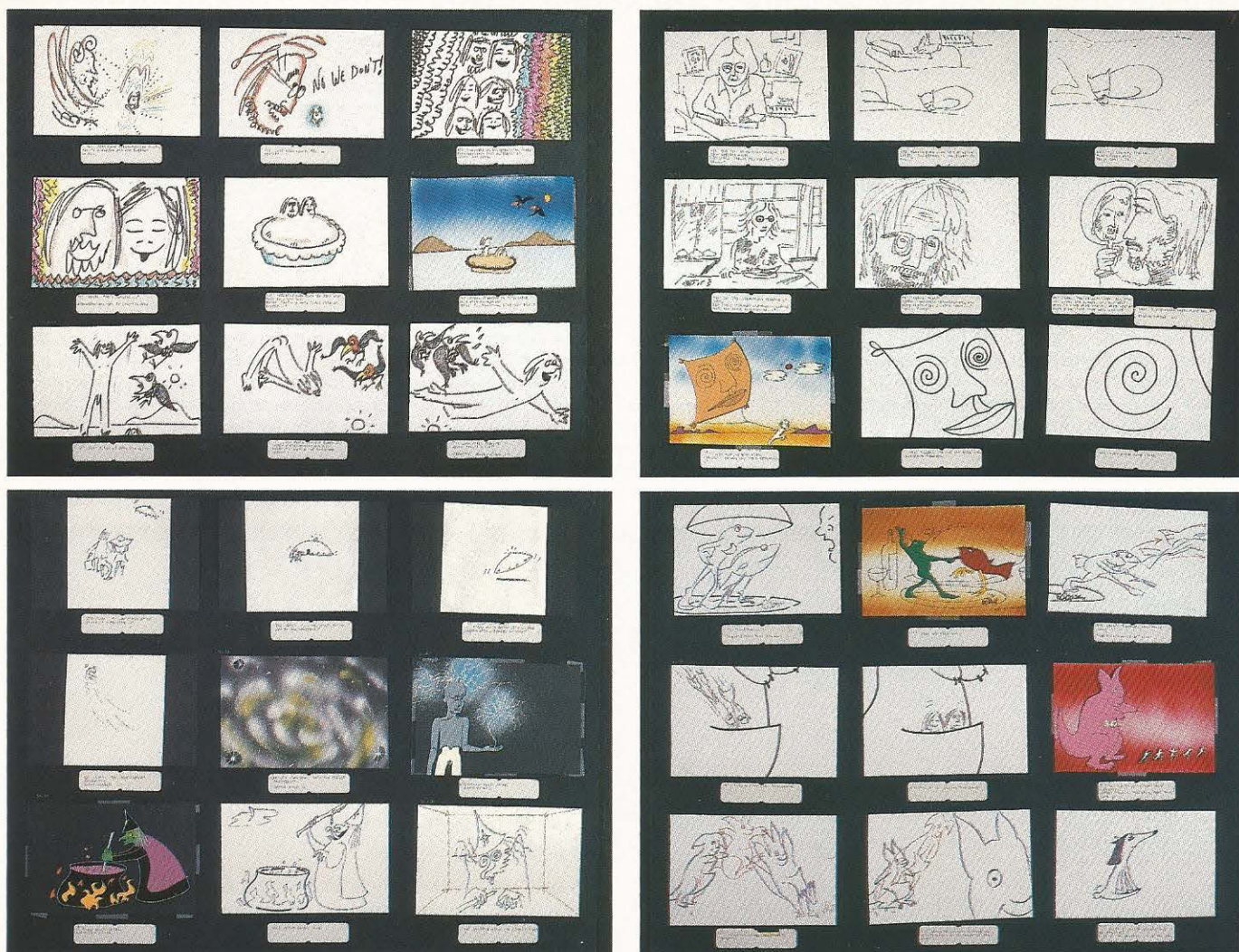
I reply that I have extensive experience animating naive or child art, for instance in *The World According To Garp*, in TV commercials and a sequence in the PBS special, “*What Do Children Think of When They Think of the Bomb?*” I have seen some of Lennon's free-form sketches and not only

feel that I can animate them, but that I could create a film that would reflect aspects of Lennon and Ono's life together. I would use their music and their words, as in my animated “documentary” “*Confessions of a Stardreamer*,” which animates the improvised dialogue of an actress describing her struggles in the theater world.

Sam agrees to arrange for me to look through Lennon's original drawings and holds onto my material to show Yoko Ono.

The Lennon Drawings

January 10, 1986. I am back at the Lennon/Ono apartment in late afternoon. The sun is about to set, and the lights are coming on all over the city—a magnificent view from this beautiful place. I am seated in a large room outside the kitchen area, where young Sean and a friend play video games before supper. A pile of about 200 John Lennon drawings are before me, some dating back to his childhood. Apparently, he was an



5. A selection of the storyboards submitted to Yoko Ono for approval prior to production. Each board contains sequential sketches detailing the action, as well as color models to demonstrate the final look of the film. Captions beneath each drawing describe the action, camera moves, special effects (e.g. cross dissolves), and showcase all dialogue and song lyrics.

inveterate doodler, continuously scribbling his candid inner thoughts about people, events, and places on any paper surface available, with pencils, felt-tip pens and ballpoints.

I feel Lennon had genuine ability as a graphic artist; he expressed himself and his feelings with a minimum of lines, which, as he got older, became haiku-like in their directness. His bizarre creatures—some part-animal and some part-human—are evident in sketches from both his childhood and adulthood. Some sketches reveal bitter thoughts about recording agents and other “ten percenters”; some drawings are erotic, while others are tender (especially those of Sean, Yoko and John together); his landscapes are as strange as George Herriman’s. Taken as a whole, Lennon’s drawings are another valid aspect of his creativity—a visual one, as biographical, imaginative and individualistic as his music.

To prepare for this meeting, I referred to three recordings to research words and music for a soundtrack for the animation. From *Starpeace*, Yoko Ono’s new album, I selected “King of the Zoo,” a song about John’s

confining celebrity status; from Lennon’s popular *Shaved Fish* album I chose “Imagine” and “Whatever Gets You Through the Night”; and from a recording of conversations with John and Yoko called *Heart Play—Unfinished Dialogue*, I found bits of talk about their relationship, having arguments, John’s temper, and the personalization of God’s image.

Patching together these excerpts would make an interesting track on which to hang Lennon’s cartoon imagery in the proposed film I have already dubbed *John Lennon Sketchbook*. As I begin reading a rough script to Sam to demonstrate how the track will sound, a small woman wearing a sweat-shirt moves through the room headed for the kitchen.

Meeting Yoko

“Yoko,” calls out Sam, “meet John Cane-maker. John, this is Yoko Ono.” We shake hands; she is unsmiling but softer-looking, more vulnerable, I think, without her famous wide dark glasses. Sam asks me to read the script again for Yoko and I nervously proceed, doing poor imitations of the voices of

John Lennon and the impassive woman before me. What must she think of this awkward audition? Suddenly, Yoko Ono laughs—giggles, really, like a girl, and says, “Oh, I like that!” I am relieved at once. At another point in the reading, she giggles again. “Oh, that’s good.” After the brief demonstration, she asks Sam to “try to work something out” with me. Sam says I am about to select drawings that might accompany the text, and we will discuss contract terms as well. Yoko leaves for the kitchen and Sean to order an orange juice for me.

I tell Sam my choices from the Lennon sketches will be spontaneous, and he replies that is how he and Yoko want me to proceed. Within a half-hour, I have selected about 75 drawings of images that amuse or intrigue me, or might fit the words of the script. Sam will see that they are photocopied for me by morning and says I should submit my contract terms immediately as “we want to move on this right away.”

January 13, 1986. I deliver a revised script containing another song chorus and a brief but eerie speech by Lennon in which he predicts his own death:

"Ghandi and Martin Luther King are great examples of fantastic non-violence who died violently. I can never work that out. We're pacifists. But I'm not sure. It's always, ah, but what does it mean, when you're, when you're such a pacifist that you, you get shot. I can never understand that."

January 28, 1986. Terms settled by our respective lawyers, a signed contract arrives from Yoko Ono and work begins on the storyboard and color models. Michael Zodorozny comes aboard as a color consultant to advise me and help retain as much Lennon in the finished product as possible.

February 6, 1986. *John Lennon Sketchbook* inspires me, and the storyboards (about a dozen 22" x 26" black panels containing nine sketches each) are ready well before the two-week deadline. Associate producer Joseph Kennedy and I bring the boards and a rough mix of the track to a morning meeting at the Dakota with Yoko and Sam Havadtoy.

Yoko's ground-floor office space contains an outer room with high ceilings and an entire wall of white file cabinets containing contracts and sundry business papers going back years. There is an Art Deco bathroom before entering the inner, larger room and shoes must be removed before stepping onto a lush white carpet. Painted clouds adorn the ceilings and one of the antique lamps is a ten-bud Tiffany, blooming among real plants. Subdued light is streaming through a shuttered window. Yoko is typing a letter at a huge oak desk inlaid with glittering Egyptian symbols. Wearing reading glasses, she is very friendly and chatty, coming around the desk to greet me and Joe Kennedy, commenting on "how funny life is" that we should meet through a stranger in Hiroshima. Sam arrives, full of eager anticipation, and I start the tape recorder; Joe helps me support and change the boards before our audience of two.

February 7, 1986. A note from Sam Havadtoy states, "Yoko is extremely pleased with the results of the storyboard. It is promising to be an exceptional product, just as we expected." Also enclosed is a reminder of the only change Yoko requested. In the original boards, the Egg Man character (an oval creature with no arms, a leather hat and a crack in his shell-face) stumbled, fell and smashed to pieces. That destruction would not go over well with Lennon fans, Yoko felt; she preferred that the Egg Man recover from his stumble, "regain his balance, look to the sky and see John and Yoko on a cloud, waving." (I recall suggesting to Yoko that she might want me to change the scene of 100 rabbits in white line on solid black mating to the music, as it might limit the television possibilities for the film. "Oh, I'm the wrong one to ask about that," she said laughing. "I always try to get away with as much as I can." The scene remains and always gets a loud laugh when it suddenly appears.

Making the Film

February 10, 1986. Norman Hollyn, music editor of *Cotton Club* and other Hollywood features, supervises the transfer of the music and voices from recordings onto 35mm audio tape, which he then cuts and prepares for a sound mix according to the script.

February 11, 1986. A blizzard rages outside The Mix Place, as Norm and I balance the sounds onto one 35mm magnetic track. Later, at my studio, I "read" each word and note required for synching of picture with sound. A piece of equipment called a synchronizer helps me pinpoint every sound on each frame of film, which I then notate on a series of exposure sheets, charts on which all production information is entered.

Animation can now begin, and I proceed to create layout sketches based on the storyboard drawings with the assistance of production managers Peter Barra and Elizabeth Seidman. Layouts are the initial composition, in correct relative size, of the visual content of each scene. Eric Abjornson is brought on to assist me with animation, and, with Barra, to handle certain scenes on his own.

Enthusiasm for the project runs high and the production moves smoothly and quickly. As scenes are animated and in-between drawings added for smooth action, they are shot by a video camera to test the motion and the staging. If approved, the scenes are pushed along to be inked on clear celluloid sheets and painted on the back side by Kevin Mercado, Stephanie McMillan, Tina Wong and Daniel Tesser. I prepare each background with airbrush, watercolor and gouache.

February 17, 1986. A visit from Sam Havadtoy to check on the film's progress and to say goodbye—in three days he will accompany Yoko, musicians and a production crew to Europe to coordinate her singing tour through the end of March. I promise to try to complete the *Sketchbook* as a welcome home present.

February 25, 1986. First scenes go to camera: Daniel Esterman at Animus Films will shoot the art onto 35mm color film, which will be developed by TVC Labs.

March 6, 1986. The last of the dailies (developed film shot the day before) is screened at the lab and approved by me.

March 8, 1986. Norm Hollyn matches the track to the scenes he has cut together and trims the final cut to four-and-a-half minutes running time. The work print and uncut negatives will be delivered to Noëlle Penraat for neg cutting before an answer print will be struck by the lab.

March 10, 1986. A letter arrives from Yoko Ninomiya. Apparently, we are still on the same psychic wavelength for she writes:

"Before I moved to the mailbox around 11 o'clock this morning, the spelling of your name occurred to my mind. As was expected, it was a letter from you! It is a pleasantly surprising letter! I am so hap-

py to know that you met Yoko Ono.

Because I imagined the scene when you met Yoko Ono and wished it would come true... I think that the power of [the] universe supports you because of your good intention."

The Completed Film

March 21, 1986. Two video cassettes of the completed *John Lennon Sketchbook* are delivered to The Dakota.

March 25, 1986. Back from Europe, Sam calls to say *Sketchbook* is "wonderful" and Yoko "loves it." I feel it works as a pilot film with a range of animation styles, from minimal to full, demonstrating that the medium can handle serious and poignant subjects as well as humorous ones.

Since the completion of the film, Yoko and Sam have been using *John Lennon Sketchbook* to explore full-length feature and TV-special possibilities world wide. Although they do not want the short to appear on television (despite offers from MTV and others), I have permission to show the 35mm version whenever I appear with my other films, and may submit the film to international film festivals.

On April 9, 1986, a tape of *John Lennon Sketchbook* played continuously throughout the run of an exhibit of Lennon lithographs at New York's Dyansen Gallery in Soho. On July 9, I supervised a recording of the *Sketchbook* soundtrack, re-mixed by Gerard Miola and Jonathan Porath. It was a thrill to see my animation moving to stereo sound from Lennon and Ono's master tapes.

The film had its official premiere on October 12, 1986 at a retrospective of my films at the Landmark Theatre in Syracuse; it was also screened with my work when I was guest of the International Animation, Comic Art and Illustration Festival in Lucca, Italy on October 29.

Recently, *John Lennon Sketchbook* was selected for showing at the Bilbao Film Festival in Spain, and in four cities in the Soviet Union: Moscow, Dushambe, Tashkent and Alma Ata. "This is a very beautiful film," wrote Feodor Hitruk, Secretary-General of the USSR branch of ASIFA, the international animation organization. The film was well-received in Hollywood as part of my film retrospective in January at the American Film Institute, and at this writing it has been submitted for competition in the Washington, D.C. Film Fest, the Los Angeles International Animation Celebration, the Annecy (France) International Animation Festival, and the Hiroshima Animation Festival, which brings us back to where this story began.

I have been asked to travel to China to screen my films. I wonder what new project might result from that experience and recall John Lennon's invitation, "Imagine!" □

John Canemaker is author of Winsor McCay—His Life and Art, published by Abbeville Press.